

2nd June 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: **55** **Immortal, invisible, God only wise**
 155 **Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire**
 345 **And can it be that I should gain**
 574 **Because you have said**
 568 **Alleluia! Sing to Jesus**

Readings: **Acts 16:16-24**
 Acts 16:25-34
 John 17:20-26

“Paul and Silas”

Prayer

Friends, we have today one of the iconic stories of the early Church – Paul and Silas – and we have come fresh from last week, when this little group with Paul has travelled to Philippi in Macedonia – and met Lydia, at whose home they have been staying.

And it is worth remembering that it was the way the Christians lived their life that drew people to Jesus, not the clarity or brilliance of their teaching, clear and brilliant as it sometimes was.

It was the way they lived their lives – especially the decisively countercultural acts – that drew people’s attention to the grace of God. This is surely still the case.

Today I invite us to re-consider Paul and Silas, power and privilege – prisons, and freedom. My purpose is for us to continue the conversation Paul and Silas had with the mob, and the jailer, and the magistrates about what it is to be saved.

What it is to be free – this Sunday when we hear of more migrants than ever on the southern beaches of this country – and in the week when we remember the D Day landings on the Normandy beaches 75 years ago. What is it to be free? To be saved?

Because the closer I have gotten to this text, the more uncomfortable I have become with it. It should be simple: We see Paul and Silas getting into a conflict with the owners of the slave girl who have been selling her as a fortune teller. We see them

tried by the mob, beaten and imprisoned, and at midnight still praising and singing. Then comes the earthquake – but do they ‘rise, go forth and follow Christ’ as in Charles Wesley’s hymn, which we will sing in a few minutes? No, they stay put.

In the typical, true teaching about this text, they are already free, in any way that matters, so have no need to leave. And also, they have an eye to the witness to the jailer, who of course marvels right along with all of us, and asks ‘how can I get this kind of freedom’ and we hear it – ‘believe on the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved.’

I have heard, and preached, sermons about re-examining the things we think of as imprisoning us – circumstance, culture, prejudice, poverty, heart brokenness, illness – or indeed, actual political oppression – re-orienting ourselves towards these supposed chains that we understand them to be no binding at all. False prisons. And claim the freedom of God’s grace, God’s love.

And I have not only preached this kind of sermon, but lived it – alongside many of you – times when our lives a calamity or reversal has found us beaten and bound in what seemed an impenetrable prison – and by God’s grace the foundations of our lives have been shaken and things we thought bound us no longer did.

When we sing Charles Wesley’s words, ‘my chains fell off’ we sing it with mutual recognition, as people for whom it has been true. And not just for prisons of the spirit, but for the change of laws, the coming of justice, the challenge to patterns of power and privilege that shake foundations and destroy actual barriers to human flourishing.

I think of the forming of the National Health Service in this country, with all its challenges, as one of these. And the civil rights and freedom movements of the middle of the last century among these. And efforts for peace making, and new life for refugees from the Syrian conflicts and the others raging today, among these. And every challenge to cycles of debt and poverty that bind people like you and me who are trafficked across our world for others’ gain is a shaking of those foundations. In the same breath I think of the choice for faith in God, and God in Christ. Freedom.

This is who our God is, and how our God works. There are many prisons that only have power because we all conspire for them to keep power. And God does shake the foundations of every one of them.

All good. But I still have a trouble with the text today, and Paul and Silas.

Because I have also seen this passage used to counsel people who are imprisoned or otherwise bound unjustly not to fight their imprisonment. Have seen this passage used to counsel someone in an abusive relationship to remain in it, giving thanks and praise to God – and even when the earthquake comes and the foundations fall, still to remain.

And while there is great power in refusing to be defined by, to acknowledge the power of mere human prisons, prison is no joke. And, we know, the peace which Jesus promised is not just the feeling of peace or an internal spiritual peace – but an actual peace. Actual release, actual freedom, that shalom of which we heard Jesus speak last week.

Make no mistake, this witness from the Acts of the Apostles – Paul and Silas - is a liberating text. If you are every having a bad day, read the Acts, and be encouraged. Like the jailer, every time I remember Paul and Silas I marvel at the foolishness of their choices – the power and reality of the freedom they already have, which nothing can take away.

But I do not think we can reduce the witness of Paul and Silas to an ethical allegory. It is far more mysterious, far more potent than a simple pattern to guide our choices.

Because despite the shouts of the mob, Paul was a Roman citizen. He had great privilege in that status – though he had thrown it over, and thrown his lot in with Jesus. And he was very savvy about when and how to use that privilege.

Such that when the magistrates catch up with what the mob has done later that day, and try to quietly release Paul and Silas, Paul refuses – he wants to make them publicly acknowledge that they have imprisoned a Roman citizen. He tests the intersection of the privilege of that status against the liability of being Christian. And the Magistrates don't want to go there – they want to leave.

I see what will happen next in the Acts as this story unfolds beyond the section we heard today as a lesson in intersectionality – the overlapping patterns of privilege, where questions like 'is his status as a citizen enough to outweigh the stigma of being a foreigner, or a religious rabble rouser and challenger of cultural norms?'

Surely, if our God is promising liberation from prisons, it means liberation from all the prisons? Including the kind where one passport is worth more than another? Where one gender is worth more than another?

In our Gospel today, you heard Jesus pray on the last night of his life for his followers and those who would come to believe through their lives, 'That they may all be one.' Remember, in the part of Jesus' prayer immediately before the section we heard today, he has prayed that his disciples would be protected in the world – not taken out of it, but sent into the midst of difficulty, protected in the midst of that difficulty. And his prayer was answered in what happened to Paul and Silas, and the people they met, and the grace they lived in.

Jesus is also praying for us, there. And not just for us you and me, and our friends, but all of us.

So I want to take us back to the first section of our reading. Because the first person to be freed in our story today was neither Paul nor Silas, but was that girl who had the spirit of divination. She met Paul and Silas as someone who was a commodity, owned and farmed for the profit of her owners. The clear sense in the text is that Paul called the spirit out of her not because he recognised her humanity and her bondage – but because he was sick of the noise. And she was free. And deprived of her market value.

I would like to think that God would shake the foundations of a prison in which a girl is sold and marketed for that, or any other purpose. Then, and today. And maybe that Paul and Silas sit in the prison even after the walls fall down in solidarity with those who are not yet free. That is not what the text says, but I would like to think it is what Jesus intended.

Because the work of salvation, that is, their and our freedom, is not about one lucky survivor or escapee, but all coming together 'that they may all be one' in human flourishing.

So. Today I have asked us to consider Paul and Silas, power and privilege – prisons, and freedom. My purpose has been to continue the conversation Paul and Silas had with the mob, and the jailer, and the magistrates about what it is to be saved.

Remember John Wesley's teaching – all can be saved, all need to be saved, all can be saved to the uttermost, and all can know themselves to be saved to the uttermost.

Just as it was their lives more than their words that drew people to believe on the Lord Jesus, so it is our lives, more than our words that still do. We are still in conversation with our world, and each other – for grace and freedom. And mobs, and prisons and all that go with them are still very real. Consider how your life speaks, refuse division, challenge evil, work for peace, and give thanks to God with Psalms and praise even at midnight.