

ACTS 16:16-24 The Adventures of Paul & Silas

This morning's reading is the next installment in Paul's road trip for the Gospel. If you were here last Sunday, you'll remember that Paul and his team experienced some very specific guidance from the Holy Spirit, leading them finally to Philippi in Macedonia, where they shared the Gospel with a group of Jews and God Fearers. It was the beginning of the Philippian church.

Paul and the others stayed in Philippi, planning to teach the new converts and establish them in their faith. They would have been on a real high. If you've ever had the privilege of leading someone to Christ, and the seeing them grow in their faith, you'll understand what Paul and his friends would have been feeling. It's a mixture of praise, elation, excitement, and gratitude. It's heady stuff.

When I was in the Taralga parish, a wonderful couple moved into our small rural parish. Eleanor was in her early 60s, on fire for the Lord and full of energy. She soon became my right hand person. She helped with everything, even the dishes and the washing! But her husband Bill wasn't a Christian. She shared she'd been praying fervently for him for more than 30 years!

Then tragically, Eleanor was diagnosed with bowel cancer. It was very advanced, and she was only with us for 6 more months. Towards the end, I visited regularly. The last time I saw her before she died, at her bedside, Bill and I talked about the Christian faith. Then I asked him if he'd like to give his life to Jesus - and he said yes! As we prayed together that day, Eleanor's joy was palpable. I was over the moon, and drove home on an absolute high! I'm sure that Paul, Silas & Luke would have felt much the same.

But then things started to go wrong. A slave girl began following them, calling out to anyone who would listen, "These men are servants of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!"

What the girl said was of course true, but the way she said it would have done more to put people off listening to Paul than to draw them to the message.

Think about it. How do we feel, when in a public place, someone starts to rant and rave about something to anyone who will listen? People feel embarrassed, don't they? They think to themselves, this person is acting inappropriately - perhaps they have a mental health problem; perhaps they are off their meds; perhaps they're on drugs; perhaps they're drunk - and usually, people will put as much space between themselves and the person acting strangely.

It was no different in the first century, though people would usually put inappropriate behaviour down to drunkenness or demon possession.

Remember Luke the physician has taken up the story, so true to his own outlook, he begins this account from his own medical perspective.

v16 “As we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination...” Luke had already diagnosed the problem - this girl was possessed by an unclean spirit.

What was divination? Basically, it was fortune telling, or predicting the future. And with supernatural insight from the evil one, often a fortune teller in the grip of an unclean spirit could get it right. This seems to be the case here, as Luke tells us that the girl made her owners a lot of money.

Just as an aside here - the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 18 in particular, is very clear about the evils of dabbling in occult practices. It was in fact, punishable by death! Why was God so serious about this? There were two reasons. The first was that dabbling in things like fortune telling, sorcery, consulting ghosts or spirits and the like, was an indication that a person was not trusting God. They were looking to gain control over their own future by getting information and advice from the evil one. The second reason, though not spelled out in the passage, is that it was downright dangerous.

I remember in my youth group days, when seances and oija boards became a party game, that our curate & youth leader sat us all down one Sunday evening and told us how dangerous it was. He gave an illustration that I've always remembered. He said, 'it doesn't matter if you 'don't believe' in all that stuff, and just consider it a bit of a joke. The fact that you participate puts you in danger. If there was a war on,' he said, "and someone who thought the war was a bit of a myth, walked out onto the battlefield and crossed the enemy line, he would still get shot at!"

In our culture that that is so open to all manner of mystical and occult practices, this is something worth remembering.

Back to the passage:

The girl kept this up day after day, and it really got to Paul. We read in v18, “But 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.”

Now, you'd think that was a good thing, wouldn't you? You'd think, being in Philippi at the Holy Spirit's specific direction, and having seen the most wonderful fruit from their obedience, that Paul & Silas would be protected, and their work blessed. But that's not what happened.

The owners of the slave girl were livid! The girl was set free from the control of the evil spirit and now she no longer had any supernatural insights. The income

stream suddenly stopped. They stirred up the crowd, had Paul & Silas arrested, flogged and thrown in jail.

How awful! Not only were they arrested, they'd been severely flogged. Not just flogged - SEVERELY flogged. And they were now in prison, and could no longer meet with the new believers, teaching them and encouraging them in their faith.

Does this mean that Paul misinterpreted his leading from the Holy Spirit? Had he made a mistake in setting free the slave girl, putting an end to their fruitful ministry and landing them in gaol?

It's not hard to make that assumption. If things start to go wrong in our ministry, or in our lives, our culture encourages us to adopt the 'Karma' mindset, which says that we get what we deserve. If we perform well, things go well. If things go wrong, it's because we've caused the problem somehow.

I suppose that may be true in some cases. For example if a person gets drunk and crashes their car, it is most likely a direct consequence of their action.

But if, like Paul & Silas, we are serving God as best we can, and things start to fall apart, or go wrong, it doesn't mean that God has suddenly abandoned us. It doesn't mean that God is now punishing us for something we've done wrong. Christians don't believe in Karma. They trust in God.

Paul reminds us in Romans 8:28 that "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

When we serve God, we are not necessarily protected from the sinful actions of others. We are not necessarily protected from the fallout from this sinful world in which we are live. But we are promised that God will work in all situations and all circumstances for good.

That still doesn't mean that God will pluck us out of a difficult situation, or turn things around so we don't suffer. What it does mean is that as we trust in God, he will work in us and through us to bring about his purposes, both in our life, and in the lives of those we touch, and we need to trust him. It may mean that we find courage, or strength, or peace or a new direction or opportunity.

This is what happened for Paul & Silas in this instance. God worked in this situation, and gave them many things. They received strength, and courage and a new opportunity.

Paul & Silas trusted God. v25 says, "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."

Note that Paul & Silas were not railing against their situation, nor were they preaching or witnessing to the prisoners. I suspect, after the flogging, they would have had little energy for that. Instead they turned their hearts to God, prayed and praised him.

In this instance God did intervene. There was an earthquake, the doors flew open and all the prisoners' chains were unfastened! Things then unfolded in a way to bring yet another soul and his family into the Kingdom of God.

The jailer supposed that the prisoners would have bolted. (I find myself wondering why they didn't - perhaps they were too terrified) The jailer was about to do himself in - which would have been far preferable to the fate he would face had the prisoners escaped.

"STOP!" yelled Paul. "Don't do it! We're all still here!"

The jailer was soundly converted. He even took Paul and Silas back to his place, dressed their wounds and fed them. Then he and his entire household were baptised.

There is much for us in this passage, that we can take into our own lives.

It reminds us that:

1. **We are empowered.** Just like Paul & Silas. The power of the Holy Spirit is always at work in and through us. He guides and directs us. He works through us to bring people to faith in Christ, and, as Jesus promised, in his name and the power of the Spirit, we can do great things - even drive out evil spirits.
2. **We are accompanied.** God never abandons us, even when things appear to be falling down around our ears. He is always there.
3. **God can bring good out of any situation** as we put our trust in him.

A fitting summary of what we find in today's passage can be found again in Romans chapter 8:37 where Paul says, "**No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.**"

Let's pray.