

Acts 16: 16-34; Jn 17: 20-26
Chester Cathedral 11.30 Eucharist
7th Sunday of Easter

Browse any of the numerous popular magazines on the shelves of any newsagent and you will find a page devoted to horoscopes. Clearly we are as fascinated now with oracles, predictions of the future, reading the stars, fortune-telling as they were in the ancient world. A lot of it is of course nonsense, pandering to our longing to know that something good will happen to us- falling in love, getting a lot of money, success in our work, in our relationships- the formula is pretty obvious. But some people do have what may perhaps be described as a deeper sense of intuition, or a sharper awareness of those dimensions of the world hidden from us most of the time. Perhaps the slave girl was one of these- certainly she seemed to recognise Paul and Silas as messengers from God, but she wasn't able to express herself except within the framework of her employment as a fortune-teller.

We know so little about this slave girl- not even her name. Did she hear voices in her head? Was she unable to control her speech- like people with Tourette's syndrome? Or did she indeed have a profound sense of the numinous- of God- but was not able to use her gift for God's glory because her masters were making commercial profit from her? In such circumstances- where human beings are exploiting others, where

advantage is being taken of someone's disability or vulnerability, where people are being forced to do something against their will- in these situations God's love, God's glory cannot shine.

I find the story of this girl disturbing. We are not told anything except that Paul exorcises her. Consequently she loses her value to her owners. What happens to her? Do we care? In today's terms, what happens when we attempt to stop the spread of drugs- obviously a good thing to do- but the poppy growers lose their livelihoods? And if we campaign against the use of dangerous pesticides to produce the flawless blooms we now demand for our bouquets-what are the consequences for the incomes of desperately poor people in developing countries? These are serious and troubling questions.

We are told only that Paul exorcises her. His action, in freeing her, lands him and Silas in prison. And here God's glory shines- not through human power, using force and oppression but in weakness and helplessness. The jailer is appalled when he realises the prison doors are wide open- he assumes quite naturally that the prisoners will have seized their opportunity and escaped and he will pay with his life. But Paul is living in tune with God- his intuition is to stay put- even though this may seem counter to all natural instincts for self-preservation- and therefore his sense of God- unlike the slave girl's- can bring salvation.

Paul risked his own life in order to save the jailer. He chooses to stay captive – at the mercy of the authorities – and that action leads the jailer – and his whole household- to belief in God.

God cannot be used for commercial gain; God cannot be forced on people. God cannot be manipulated or bargained with. God cannot be revealed when we protect ourselves and put our own safety first. Paul was not thinking about himself- his whole focus was on the jailer's wellbeing. It is here that we find God, when we can put our neighbour before ourselves, when our concern for our neighbour guides our own actions.

Our Archbishop, Rowan Williams has written (in *Silence and Honey Cakes*, the wisdom of the desert) that a relationship with eternal truth and love simply doesn't happen unless we mend our relations with Tom, Dick and Harriet. The actual substance of our relationship with eternal truth and love is bound up with how we manage the proximity of these human neighbours.'

In John Donne's words - 'No man is an island, complete unto himself.' Our life- our death-our salvation-is bound up with other human beings. Relationship is at the heart of the nature of God- one might say that God IS relationship. Loving relatedness is at the heart of reality- and it is our first experience as a human being- the relationship between mother and baby comes before

the baby develops any sense of separate selfhood. Henry Moore created some marvellous sculptures of mother and child- and many are carved from a single piece of stone. It seems that human beings are carved from a single piece of stone- we are profoundly and intimately connected.

Jesus prays to his Father: 'the glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.'

We are invited into relationship- awesomely- with the creator of all that is. We are invited to experience God's presence- as close as the air we breathe- and to know that that loving presence sustains us and all other human beings. And so it is not possible to be aware of God with us without being acutely aware of those around us- even as in Paul's case- those doing us harm. It is not a question of trying to second-guess the future and protect ourselves from potential pain; we cannot abuse our giftedness- in the case of the slave girl it is her masters who are culpable- and how often is that the case in our world today- people are controlled and abused for the financial gain of others-but we are called to live our giftedness in relationships of love and care for others. And there cannot be any limitation on how we define 'others'.

Jesus prays also 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.' 'On behalf of' is a very profound Christian principle, and it means quite simply that our salvation is not personal but communal. When the jailer asks Paul how he can be saved Paul replies 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' Our own faith is not primarily for ourselves but 'on behalf of' others- it is to be lived outwardly- in our care and concern for those around us, and those far from us- in our willingness to be involved in the great issues of social justice, the environment, the many ways in which people are imprisoned and abused. Perhaps most especially on behalf of those who are the poor in our world- disadvantaged, disabled, abused, unable to live the precious gift of their life positively. Our love for them – for the apparently unlovely-is crucial. We cannot turn our backs- say it isn't our problem, we can't do anything. We are carved from a single block of stone, and how we live as people of faith will have a profound effect on others, whether for good or ill. We can live our faith in a way that connects others with life-giving reality or we can deny that to others. It is a terrible responsibility.

Paul, living God's life, responding to God's love deep inside- exorcises the slave girl and frees the jailer, draws him and his household into the life of God. One stone drops into a pool but the ripples spread outward, in ever expanding circles- because God will not rest until all are

drawn into the circle of his embrace and we are precious partners in making that circle ever wider and more inclusive.

We do not need to second-guess the future- our future, our only security- is within this circle.

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