

'Free at Last!'

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 16. 16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22. 12-14, 16, 17, 20, 21; John 17. 20-26

One of the delights of Easter season each year is that every Sunday we have a passage from the Book of Acts highlighted to us, culminating next Sunday with the account of the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

But in our penultimate episode from Acts today, we hear about Paul and Silas, who bring freedom to an unnamed slave girl from spiritual possession, and yet, as a consequence, find themselves in a very physical captivity, as they are thrown into jail overnight.

An experience, which will always stick with me, was a couple of year's ago on holiday when we visited Lincoln and went around the Victorian prison in Lincoln castle. Now a museum, the prison was designed for 'the separate system' – a Victorian project whose goal was to prevent the prisoners from being able to 'corrupt' each other by keeping them entirely isolated from one another at all times.

What made such a stark impact on me – and this was so strong that I would even describe it as a spiritually negative experience – was seeing the prison chapel.

This was a space where the prisoners were to pray and to hear the word of God, presumably in the hope that something of God's incredible love and grace would permeate their souls, and enable them to acknowledge their sin and receive God's forgiveness. And yet, what had been created was a space which was severe, oppressive and dehumanising – where each prisoner would be escorted to an individual booth, separated off by wooden barriers from every other prisoner, with only a small slot through which they could look and see the pulpit rising high above them.

What struck me so terribly was the contrast between a faith I hold dearly to be redeeming, hope-filled and life-giving, and a chapel, a place of worship, which felt oppressive, not just physically but spiritually.

It was then I realised, more than ever, that to be held captive is so much more than being physically confined – but about being held in emotional and even spiritual captivity as well.

In our world today, we can find ourselves held captive, enslaved, in so many ways. From corrupt systems of power – sweat shops, zero hour contracts, an unloving benefit system, even modern-day slavery. To unhealthy relationships – whether because of the manipulative actions of others, or because of our own resentment and attitudes. To ways in which we can make ourselves captive through addiction, whether that's to a physical substance like drugs or alcohol, or an emotional need to be successful or popular.

And yet our faith is about freedom! About Jesus Christ the Liberator who came to bring freedom from sin and death, who comes to free us from everything which might enslave us, who we see in the book of Revelation will come in glory to establish his kingdom of

peace for ever. The same Jesus Christ, who works through Paul and Silas and Luke, and the many other early followers of Jesus, in the book of Acts to change the lives of those they encounter.

So, what does it mean to be set free? Why is it that in our time we still find ourselves enslaved in so many ways? And how can the chains which bind us today be worked loose, and their hold on us broken?

This passage from Acts presents us with two stories – one or both of which you may well have heard separately before, but which, when they appear together, provoke a really interesting reflection on captivity and freedom.

When the slave girl is healed by Paul she is liberated in one very important way – she is now spiritually free from the demon which had possessed her. And yet she is still caught up in a societal system, supported by those in power, which her held her captive, exploited her for profit, and now has no use for her.

We are not told what happens to her in the end. We could be optimistic and hope that she was freed, able to find her way into a new life – perhaps even to join those first followers of the way of Jesus Christ. But at the same time, it seems very likely that she may have been discarded like a tarnished possession which now has no worth left, perhaps passed on to be exploited by others, perhaps left abandoned and alone like the tragic tale of Fantine from *Victor Hugo's Les Miserables*.

What is made clear by this encounter is that to bring freedom is no easy task – systems of oppression, whether then or now, are so insidious and totalising – multi-dimensional – that when we find ourselves captive the physical, emotional, spiritual outworking of that captivity can not be miraculously fixed overnight.

And yet to be Christian is to believe that there is always hope – that Christ *has* won victory over all the powers of evil, death and darkness once *and* for all, and that our task now, the task of the Church, is to tear down those systems which remain and establish in their place structures of healing and justice.

It is this hope which now compels Paul and Silas – even when they are scorned, even when they are slandered and rumours now spread of what they have done, even when they are attacked, battered and beaten, even when they are left to rot in a Roman prison cell.

This is a hope which is so unshakable, that even left in the dark, in their cell overnight, their feet in irons – what do they do? They pray and they sing. They pray to the God they still believe has power to save, and they sing songs of the victory won and the faithfulness of the God in whom they have placed their lives.

And the result? An earthquake which shakes the ground and breaks not only their chains, but sets free every prisoner in the whole place.

At this point we discover that the jailor is caught in a prison of his own, working in a regime where it would be better for him to take his own life than face the wrath of his superiors. And yet he is surprised, not just by the power of God brought about by Paul and Silas, but also his incredible compassion, when, shocked, he discovers all the prisoners are still there.

It is this combination – of power and compassion – which brings freedom and transformation in the lives of those in our reading.

Power and compassion – which we see so clearly in the person of Jesus Christ, who John tells us in his gospel came that the world may believe, and know God's incredible, extravagant, liberating love.

Power and compassion – which God is able to bring to bear in our lives if we will only allow him.

Power and compassion – which God gives us, his Church, to act to bring justice and freedom in our world today.

In his iconic 'I have a dream' speech delivered in Washington, DC, in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. began by telling the crowd that they had come to 'cash a cheque' which had already been written. Their freedom had been won five score years ago and now they were going to fight to receive it. That's how he began but I wonder whether you know, whether you can remember, how he ended?

He finished with the words of a song – one of the negro spirituals, which the black slaves had sung together to give them hope and to encourage them to make the leap to freedom on the Underground Railroad. This was the song: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Our God of Liberation, has bought our freedom through our Saviour Jesus and one day *will* make all people 'free at last' from every oppressive power and dominion and system of this world. So as we come to his table this morning, may we know his power *and* his compassion, that his song of hope might always be on our lips. Amen.