

ACTS 16.25-34: THE GOOD NEWS REACHES A PRISON GOVERNOR [Chelmsford 13 June 2010]

1. JESUS MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

When were you last in *jail*? Thank God, as far as most of us are concerned, the last time we were in jail was when we were playing *Monopoly*.

Going to jail in such a circumstance is a really frustrating experience: there you are, about to go down some of the really expensive properties before picking up £200, & then all of a sudden you are forced backed and made to wait a turn.

Yes, it's a frustrating experience - but of course nothing like the real thing.

The real thing is altogether different.

Chelmsford prison is no holiday camp. It's a degrading & depressing place.

Prisons may be a necessity, but nonetheless it is a terrible thing to have to lock people away for years at a time.

This morning I want to look at an occasion when *the apostle Paul and his fellow missionary, Silas, went to prison.*

It must have been a far from pleasant experience for them

- They knew themselves to be *innocent* – for they had been imprisoned on a trumped-up charge. If you were to read the whole of Acts 16 you would discover that Paul & Silas had been wrongly arrested because they had become a threat to certain commercial interests – the business-men had been clever enough to appeal to people's anti-semitic prejudices, with the result that the whole city had ganged up against Paul Silas.
- They had been severely beaten (vv22,23). This was no ordinary caning on the back-side which head masters used to mete out: it actually involved a beating with rods around the eyes & the face, as well as the rest of the body – at the end of the process Paul & Silas would have been a bloody mess. In many instances such a beating was regarded as a sufficient punishment for people who had broken the law.
- They were imprisoned in the equivalent of a top-security wing; "**the inner cell**" (v24). When I visited Philippi I saw what the guide claimed to have been the inner cell in which Paul and Silas were incarcerated. Less than half the size of our church's disabled toilet, there were no windows for light to come though. Almost certainly Paul & Silas were in darkness, deprived of any light. Add to that the presence of rats, it must have been a dreadful experience.
- But that wasn't all. Luke tells us that the jailer "**fastened their feet between heavy blocks of wood**" (v24): i.e. they were put into the stocks. As archaeological discoveries at Philippi have confirmed, these Roman stocks were instruments of torture - the holes were so arranged that your legs were forced apart to increase the discomfort and pain - indeed, it may be that not only their feet, but also hands & heads may have been put into stocks – just imagine trying to sleep in such a position

How would you have reacted?

- Would you have protested and have gone on a hunger strike?
- Or would you have moaned and moaned?

Luke tells us: "**Paul and Silas were singing hymns**" (v25).

Most people would've cursed their luck - renounced their gods - tried to bribe the jailer - but not Paul and Silas. Bloody and in great pain, they praised God.

What a difference Jesus can make to people's lives.

Jesus did not promise his followers a trouble-free life. But he did promise that in the midst of our troubles he would be with us. This was Paul's experience.

As he wrote some years later to the church at Philippi: "**I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me**" (4.13).

I've just come back from Lebanon where I was teaching in a theological college for men and women from the Arabic-speaking world. Many of them knew that when they return home to places like Morocco and Algeria they will face persecution and the likelihood of imprisonment. And yet I heard them praising God in their chapel services. Life is very different here in the UK of course – apathy, not persecution, is the norm. Yet even so, life can be tough. Christians are not immune from losing their jobs, losing their health, losing their loved ones. Life can be tough. But in the midst of the pain, the mess, the darkness, Jesus is there – and he makes all the difference. He gives us strength – he gives us hope – and so we can praise him!

So there they were, praising God, when suddenly there was a "**violent earthquake, which shook the prison to its foundations**" (v26).

If this were to happen here in Chelmsford, it would be highly unusual, but not in Philippi. Philippi was a district where earthquakes were not uncommon. Indeed, as I learnt in my trip to Greece some years ago, the whole country seems to be prone to earthquakes – all kinds of great temples have come crashing down, because of an earthquake.

But when this particular earthquake took place in Philippi, the walls of the prison didn't come tumbling down – no, all that happened was that the bars holding the doors shut were dislodged, and the bolts on the walls jumped out of position.

The timing and intensity of the earth quake was quite providential.

Everybody was shell-shocked.

- ***Paul & Silas' fellow-prisoners*** certainly were stunned – instead of legging it, they remained in their cells, terrified perhaps by what they deemed to be the magical power of these two Jewish sorcerers who could bring about an earthquake.
- ***The jailer*** too was also in a state of shock. His living quarters seem to have been above the dungeons in which Paul & the other prisoners had been put. He rushed down the stairs, his heart going like the clappers. He must have thought this was the end – for under Roman law jailers were personally responsible for their prisoners and could be executed if their prisoners escaped. Indeed, because "**he thought that the prisoners had escape... he pulled out his sword and was about to kill himself**" (v27).

But Paul came to his rescue – for although it was dark, the doors were now open – and in the gloom Paul seeing that the jailer was about to commit kami-kaze shouted out "**Don't harm yourself! We are all here**" (28)

The jailer was overwhelmed – "**he fell trembling at the feet of Paul & Silas**". "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**"

2. EXPERIENCE THE DIFFERENCE JESUS CAN MAKE TO YOUR LIFE

Here we have what has been described as *'the greatest question'* in the Bible. It is the greatest question, in the sense that it is *the question that all of us should ask ourselves*. For it is only when we ask that question and receive its answer that we begin to discover the secret of life.

Having said that, we have to be honest & say that we do not know what precisely the jailer had in mind, when he asked the question.

Almost certainly it wasn't the religious kind of question that we have turned it into. He might just have meant: "*Gentlemen, how can I get out of this almighty mess? How can I be saved from the consequences of having ill-treated two obviously powerful magicians?*"

But Paul used this question as an opportunity to talk about Jesus.

Do notice that ***Paul did not offer therapy.***

When today a disaster takes place – whether it be an earthquake or a shipwreck, an air crash or a bombing or a deranged man shooting innocents in Cumbria – we bring in the counsellors. We give people cups of hot sweet tea, wrap them up in blankets, and basically tell them they will be OK.

We encourage the victims to talk things through – to get the trauma off their chest.

But Paul didn't say to the jailer: "*Sit down, take a deep breath – things aren't as bad as they seem – everything will eventually come right*".

For Paul knew that everything was not right. The fact is that our lives are blighted – blighted by sin – and what's more, without God our lives will be blighted forever.

As Paul later wrote to the church at Rome: "**We have all sinned**" – we have all failed to reach God's standards. And the consequence of sin, is "**death**" – i.e. eternal separation from God.

Nor did Paul offer religion.

The voice of religion would have said: "*You've been a naughty boy. You've treated Paul & Silas dreadfully – you've ignored their human rights – you've tortured them – you've deprived them of light. For goodness sake get your life back into order. If you want to please God, you need to start treating people properly. Even though you are a jailer, you need to show some kindness & some fairness.*"

But Paul didn't say to the jailer: "*Repent – start to live a better life*".

For Paul knew from his own experience that it is hopeless trying to earn Brownie points with God – for even our best is not good enough for God.

No, ***he offered Jesus.***

Would that we had the full transcript of what Paul said on that occasion.

All we have is Luke's summary statement: "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved**" (v31).

The odds are that the jailer knew next to nothing about Jesus. So Paul will have had to tell him about Jesus, and the difference that Jesus makes to this life and the next.

He will have told him how Jesus died for us on a Cross that we might be put right with God; how Jesus was raised from the dead that we might be freed from the power of death; how Jesus is present with us through his Spirit today.

He will have told them the difference Jesus makes. As Paul makes so clear in his letter to the church at Philippi, Jesus gives hope, joy, peace, purpose and direction to life. So much so, that Paul writes: **“For me to live is Christ”** (Phil 1.21 NRSV).

Yes, Paul will have spoken to the jailer about the transforming power of Jesus, **“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved”**.

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and be saved from the mess that sin creates in this life, and discover the difference that Jesus can make to this world and the next.

“Believe” – or in the words of another version: **“Put your entire trust”** (The Message) in Jesus.

The story is told of John Paton, a Scottish missionary to the Pacific islands, who took on the task of translating the Bible into the language of those whom he was seeking to win for Christ. In the course of his translation work he struggled to find the right word to translate **“faith”**. One day an islander came into his study and throwing himself down upon a chair exclaimed, **“How good it is to lean my whole weight upon this chair!”** There & then Paton realised he had found the word for faith:

But is it not just a matter of believing. ***We have to believe in Jesus.***

Saving faith involves **“leaning our whole weight upon” Jesus** for our salvation.

Trusting him to hold us/save us – now and forever.

In a few moments Tobi, David & Julian will entrust themselves to Nicholas & myself in the belief that we will not drop them in the water, but will bring them up again. Saving faith involves a similar element of trust.

“What must I do to be saved?” “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!”.

3. RESPOND IN FAITH

Thank God, the jailer didn't simply ask the right question – he also made the right response. Luke tells us that after Paul & Silas had **“preached the word of the Lord to him...he was baptized”** (v34).

Luke doesn't need to say that he believed – for believing is synonymous with baptism. When the jailer was baptised, he didn't simply get wet – rather he put his faith into action and responded to Christ's offer of forgiveness & of new life.

And that's precisely what ***these three*** will be doing this morning.

In many ways ***they are very different from the jailer*** – they haven't roughed up any apostles – their hands are clean from the kind of abuse in which the jailer was involved. ***Yet like the jailer they know their need to get right with God*** – their need to be saved - for even our best is flawed.

This is made very clear when the Apostle Paul later wrote to the church at Philippi: **‘At one stage, he said, I was a religious goody-goody if ever there was one. But then my eyes were opened and I discovered thateverything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant – dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ & be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior**

brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ – God’s righteousness” (The Message).

To return to the three: they too wish to respond to God’s love for them in Jesus..
And so they wish to be baptised. Before I baptise them, I shall ask each of them this question: *“Do you profess repentance toward God and faith in Jesus as your Saviour & your Lord?”* Baptism is faith’s response to the grace of God.

It took an earthquake to jolt the jailer out of his complacency
What I wonder will it take you to jolt you out of your complacency?
I would love to think that it may be this baptismal service – so that as a result of what you have seen & heard you too will ask: **“What must I do to be saved”** And that in turn you will believe & begin to discover the salvation that God offers you in Jesus

Jesus makes all the difference – to this life, and to the world to come.
Don’t miss out on Jesus.