

**3<sup>rd</sup> September 2017**

## **Acts 16**

We continue our look at the exploits of the first apostles as recorded in Acts chapters 13-20. We are looking at what habits or disciplines sustained them in their faith and mission and today's holy habit is eating together. At the end of chapter 16 comes this remarkable scene where a Roman jailor throws a mid-night party for two battered and bruised prisoners who have been heralds of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a bizarre celebration of God's kingdom where enemies have been reconciled as friends and eat together.

One of the most famous stories of a jailer befriending his prisoner was of Nelson Mandela and his jailer Christo Brand.

Brand was 18-year-old fresh from the farmlands of the Afrikaner hinterland when, in 1978, he was sent to Robben Island as a prison warden. He had been warned he would be guarding the most dangerous of terrorists. To his surprise, Prisoner 46664, then aged 60, asked him about his family, his upbringing, his fears for the future. "There was no color barrier between us," said Brand, "Like me, Mandela came from a farm. He was a human being. We understood that we shared the same sky and the same air."

Brand's bond with his prisoner was against all the rules. Still, as the apartheid authorities began to soften their stance and explore the possibility of negotiations with Mandela in the late 1980s, the friendship was tolerated. When Mandela was moved on a couple of further occasions Brand moved with him. "When he was released, the prison was empty for me," he said. "He was very down to earth. And he was a person who loved children. When I had a problem, he would give me advice." Even today, Brand said he still finds wondrous how Mandela was able to transform their relationship. "He was my prisoner," he said. "But he was my father."

Desmond Tutu once said he believed prison was the making of [Nelson Mandela](#). "I often surprise people when I say this," he said. "Suffering can lead to bitterness. But suffering is also the infallible test of the openness of a leader, of their selflessness." When Mandela had gone to jail, he had been "one of the most angry," said Tutu. "The suffering of those 27 years helped to purify him and grow the magnanimity that would become his hallmark." Jail helped Mandela learn how to make enemies into friends, said Tutu. It also gave him an unassailable credibility. "When you speak of forgiveness, 27 years in prison sets you up very nicely," he said.<sup>i</sup>

Perhaps what we saw, and admired and revered in Mandela, is this: the human instinct veers towards anger and hate, clings to resentment and grudge. In his own deeply personal actions, and in his political decisions, Mandela walked away from what is the human instinct, or what we expect to be the normal human instinct. He chose freedom from his own demons.<sup>ii</sup>

In doing so, he chose to take his own people along with him, and make them set aside their own demons too. He made a warring, hate-filled South Africa choose peace and reconciliation above that which was expected. He made them turn away from war.

The early church was known as a group of believers who ate together. Then, as now, eating together is a sign of friendship and a willingness to be open to one another. Food is such an important ingredient to making fellowship happen.

If any of you have been to a Sikh temple you will know that you enter through the kitchen and dining hall first. Sikh's are very hospitable and will offer you food before you do anything else. I remember my first week at university and deciding to give church a go. I went to my local United Reformed Church in Nottingham, because it started at 11 am so I got a bit of a lie in and it was a ten-

minute walk from campus so I didn't have to pay a bus fare. It was a small congregation of mainly elderly people. The worship was nothing to write home about but at the end of the service I got an invitation to lunch by a retired couple, Bill and Beryl. After a Sunday lunch, you would pay good money for, Beryl said she had baked a chocolate cake and would I like to take it back with me. You bet I did! I stayed at that church for the next seven years and ended up candidating for ministry from it. The bribe of a chocolate cake was used by the Holy Spirit to draw me in. Do not underestimate the importance of food for fellowship and for friendships. It is a massive sign of welcome and acceptance.

Luke in his gospel and his book of Acts was particularly keen to place food and eating together at the heart of the discipleship community. In his gospel, there are numerous references to food and drink in which Jesus is seen sharing a meal. It is a corporate activity and builds community. Jesus was known for expanding social boundaries and eating with people who were marginalized by the rest of his society as unclean or morally suspect. Eating with tax collectors, prostitutes brought them into the orbit of God's grace.

The gatherings to eat together were signs of God's reign and the tradition of the heavenly banquet – a sign of the

inclusivity of God's kingdom. This was fellowship characterized by acceptance and equality.

At the start of Acts 16 Paul and his colleagues find themselves in Philippi in Macedonia, after the Holy Spirit had kept them from preaching the gospel in Asia. We are not told how the Holy Spirit did this – but if we are open to God's guidance then we trust that closed doors may lead to open doors in another direction. Guidance is about a willingness to follow God's prompts and not be disheartened when we don't get where we want to be. God always has other ideas, bend to that direction and go with God.

Like he does in most new cities Paul doesn't start preaching in the outdoors. He would have been arrested and picked up in no time. Paul's tactic is to go where the Jews were worshipping, where people gathered for prayer and so were inclined towards things spiritual. He notices that people gather for prayer down by the river and so he joins them. It is mainly a group of women and Paul starts talking with them. One of them is named Lydia who was a business woman, an independent figure dealing in expensive cloth. She was the Ann Wintour or Karen Millen or Victoria Beckham of first century northern Greece.

Luke tells the story of her conversion extremely simply: The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. Here was someone who was praying and seeking God. Perhaps it was due to her prayers that Paul had received his vision to come to Macedonia and had been bared by the Holy Spirit from going into Asia. Anyway, the word Paul shared was in Lydia's case tapping at a window that was already open. You see you never know with people how open or resistant they are to the Christian faith. Of course, I you never have the courage to share your faith, or confess to praying, following Christ, belonging to a church – you'll never draw a reaction from people whether they are open to know more and show interest or react negatively.

Lydia has her household baptized and realizes that Paul and his companions would be better off in establishing their ministry if they resided in someone's home than if they were staying in an inn somewhere, so she insists on inviting them to stay with her. She opens up her life and her home as part of this hospitable ministry. See how the gospel transforms individuals.

Barbara Glasson was a Methodist minister who was sent as a pioneer minister to inner city Liverpool to try and work with local people and share the gospel with them. She found little interest in traditional church, coming

along on Sunday morning to sing hymns and hear a sermon. But then the Holy Spirit put in her mind the image of yeast. Something small and used in many of the parables of Jesus. She thought about bread. She discovered that people were interested in food and being fed. From a poor area their main concern was survival and having the basics. She started the Bread Church where people came to make and bake bread. As they kneaded the dough and waited for the bread to bake conversations were had, friendships were formed that led to faith.

A small community evolved, very naturally, around the regular bread-making times. While the bread was rising, the conversation would turn to the important issues of life, shared in the warm kitchen. People would read from the Bible, pray for one another. They became companions (= cum panis, with bread).

Some of those who were given free bread and who were drawn into the group came from the homeless street-dwellers of the big city.

Barbara's approach is disarmingly simple. 'We try to be a place where people can be warm, safe and who they are, around the bread.' 'Making bread has taught us so much – the process of baking mirrors so much in life: the pummelling and proving is about how we engage with one

another, the waiting for the dough to rise is about how we give each other time. Churches generally are a bit obsessed with numbers and outcomes. But the bread makes us wait ... it needs to rest, to rise. In the waiting time, the smell of the bread triggers memories and facilitates story so that people quite naturally talk to each other. And every loaf we make is different. Bread is a sign to the world.

Locally we know of the work of the Marah trust in providing a meal for those who are homeless or disadvantaged and the work of grace they offer through that ministry. Our Foodbank also knows the problem of food poverty in our area and the importance of food and access to it for many people. Eating is a gospel issue.

Back in Philippi, Lydia has opened her home to Paul and his fellow missionaries but not everyone in the city is as welcoming. Malevolent forces are stirred up, as they often are, by the impact of the gospel. First strange spiritual forces are at work when a female slave who has a spirit of fortune telling yells out that Paul and his friends are servants of the most High God who are trying to save you. Paul can do without this publicity and also may have felt sorry for this slave girl. Eventually he turns around and calling not on some nebulous vague Most high God, but

on the name of Jesus, he commands the spirit of fortune telling to leave her. And it did.

Which of course brought the second malevolent forces into play. The profit motives. The girl's owners were suddenly bereft of business and have lost money – which of course is another impact of the gospel.

And so, they invoke the third malevolent force: religious and political prejudice, dragging Paul and Silas before the magistrates saying they are advocating customs which we Romans ought not to adopt. They are trying to change our customs.

Paul and Silas get stripped, flogged and jailed, as they discover what happens to those who challenge the powers of the world with the power of the name of Jesus.

In prison Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God whilst the prisoners listen to them in disbelief. Even in the midst of hardship and suffering Paul and Silas keep their focus and faith on God.

There is a violent earthquake and chains are loosened. The jailer wakes up to find the doors of the prisons open. He is about to kill himself because he knows his life will be taken if he is responsible for the escape of the prisoners, but Paul shouts to him not to as they are still here. Do

yourself no harm for we are all here. In our pastoral care conversation the other week we touched on how those contemplating suicide commonly feel a lack of hope and feel all alone. Hear those words if you get into that position: do no harm – for we are all here. The church is here. Jesus promises never to leave us nor forsake us.

The jailer falls before them trembling asking what must he do to be saved.

The translation of that verse is more like what must I do to get out of this mess. He got more than he bargained for, just as people regularly do when they ask questions which everyone from Jesus himself to the youngest and most inexperienced evangelist can take and deepen.

Because the Christian worldview sees the entire mess that the world is in, from the global facts of human rebellion, idolatry and sin, the corruption of human life and relationships, the pollution of the planet, the worldwide systems of economic exploitation and so on, right through to this messy situation here and now, this sudden crisis, this person in desperate need or sorrow or fear, and this person whose own deliberate sin had raised a dark barrier between themselves and God – the Christian worldview sees all of this under the heading the mess we are in as opposed to the way the world will be when Jesus is

reigning as Lord. That's why Paul answers 'believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved'. It is always the answer to the question of how to be rescued, at whatever level and at whatever sense.

In other words, Paul and Silas address both the very specific question the jailer asked and the deep, heart deep, God-deep question which they can see lies beneath it.

'Jesus is Lord' was from earliest times what new converts said as they came for baptism and here the jailer does that and also his household. When you acknowledge Jesus as Lord you are putting God back into your life and making God number one. Everything else follows from that for your well-being, humility, place in the world and relationships with God's creation. It isn't about getting in touch with your inner spiritual self. It isn't about committing to a life of worship, prayer and good works or even believing certain theories about faith. It is about recognising who is Lord and who can ultimately sort this mess out. With God in your life there is always hope. You can be saved.

The jailer is filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – a sure sign that the Holy Spirit had come into his life. If no joy in your faith at the moment ask for a fresh infilling of the Spirit – know his touch and presence.

As a sign of that joy he invites Paul and Silas into his house and sets a meal before them. They eat together.

Eating together can create a safe space in which to share and deepen faith and to offer the invitation to explore the adventure of discipleship. At the table, you can ask questions and share stories, needs and struggles. You can celebrate life's joys and rejoice together when you see prayers answered. It allows fellowship to flourish. It is no surprise that the most popular process evangelism course – Alpha – integrates eating together with discussion on the Christian faith.

Many churches in America I visited on a sabbatical had outside caterers provide a Sunday lunch each week so that the congregation could stay on and enjoy time together. All the best parties are in the kitchen they say – I hope we get around to restoring our kitchen in our upper hall, because it would make such a difference to have the facilities to be able to eat together.

We come now to eat together with our Lord – in a sign of inclusivity of God's kingdom and a foretaste of the

heavenly banquet. We eat and drink together and declare Jesus is Lord.

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<sup>i</sup> Alex Parry <http://world.time.com/2013/12/06/mandelas-jailer-he-was-my-prisoner-but-he-was-my-father/>

<sup>ii</sup> Justice Malala <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/nelson-mandela/10501060/Mandela-looked-his-enemy-in-the-eye-and-held-him-close.html>