**2nd June 2019**

**Focus Scripture: Acts 16:16–34**

Ascension Day was on Thursday when the church recalls how Jesus left the disciples saying that they had to wait for the coming of the Spirit to have the power to be his disciples and spread the gospel over the world. This period between ascension and Pentecost – which is next Sunday is known as the novena, ten days for prayer and an ecumenical initiative has gained popularity over the last few days to use this time to pray for the world, to pray for friends to come to faith in Jesus.

Jim and Steph have made promises before you to do what they can to encourage Ada to find faith in Christ.

If committed church members don’t see the importance of communicating the faith even to their own children, then we are far from creating a culture of disciple making people empowered by the Spirit.

Someone wrote:

 ‘sitting watching my grandson eat his lunch as I write leaves me pondering. What do I most long for in his life as it stretches out before him? Good health, certainly. Academic success, a rewarding career and happy family life would be good too. But is that what truly matters? Above all else, I long for him to know he is a child of God, and to live life in all its fullness following Jesus. If we believe that life as a disciple is life at its best, there is nothing of greater importance we can desire for those we treasure most in the next generation.

May God bless Steph and Jim and us as we help Ada find that faith that can transform and release her to a, life of fulfillment.

As we continue to look at the mission of the early church we have a passage where there are accounts of faith and people finding faith. There is a powerful spirit who possesses the girl, who also is controlled by those who “own” and profit from her. There are civil authorities who mistreat Paul and Silas, and the jailer who imprisons them. The theme of welcome so prominent in the stories of Lydia that precede and follow this event make Paul’s and Silas’s treatment at the hand of these authorities even more despicable. And there is, above all, the power of God’s Spirit and the power in the name of Jesus to save.

Paul and his party had walked into territory where all kinds of forces, all sorts of power, were at work, and three of them in particular come rushing together in this story. If you remember last week we looked at how the Holy Spirit had been at work in Lydia’s life opening her heart to the message of the good news of Jesus Christ. Now it seems as though strange spiritual forces had been stirred up in this place by this new gospel work. The ancient world new all about ‘divination’ as people regularly went to places like Delphi to ask the priestess of Apollo for advice on everything from getting married to making war. Sometimes it seems that the system was merely a matter of cynical folk making profit out of simple gullible souls. But sometimes, as here, it turns more sinister.

This is a grave warning to us – in this age when alternative therapies, new age spiritualities, occult practices, fortune telling, tarot cards, Ouija boards and such like are commonplace and accepted and fashionable. The Bible and Christian experience warns of harmful spiritual influences in our lives and the need to test the spirits whether these are from God – whether they acknowledge Jesus as Lord. In this story a woman actually possesses some kind of prophetic spirit. And her minders were making a tidy profit from it. But like a compass needle swinging suddenly round to point to a new and powerful magnetic force, the unfortunate young woman found herself following Paul and Silas and yelling after them. ‘These are servants of the most High God and are declaring a way of salvation’.

Now to people in Greece at that time ‘the most High God’ would have meant Zeus or whoever people thought was top god in the pantheon. And salvation wouldn’t mean what it meant to a Jew or a Christian, entry into the world of God’s new creation, overcoming corruption, sin and death. It would mean health and prosperity or rescue of some kind of disaster. This was the kind of publicity that Paul could’ve done without.

Paul turns around and calling not on some nebulous ‘most high god’ but on the name of Jesus, (which is why you should always make your prayers in the name of Jesus) he commands the spirit of prophecy to leave her and it did.

Jim and steph have been specific today in wanting Ada to grow up, not just ‘spiritual’ but Christian.

The second malevolent force comes into play: the profit motive. The girl’s minders were suddenly out of business. Not for the first time, when the gospel suddenly impacts someone’s trade, they turn nasty. After Paul had healed her the one thing the girl’s owners felt was not joy at her restoration but fury that their source of revenue had gone.

Whenever Christianity attacks vested interest trouble follows. It is characteristic of human beings that if their pockets are touched and their profits threatened they are up in arms.

It is every person’s duty to ask themselves ‘is the money I am earning worth the price? Do I earn it by serving others or by exploiting others?’

The owners of the slave girl invoke the third malevolent force: religious and political prejudice. They drag Paul and his party before the magistrates and say they are Jews advocating customs we Romans ought not to adopt. These people are not like us – they are anti our customs. They get Paul and Silas flogged and jailed. Paul and Silas discover what happens to those who challenge the powers in control of this world with the power of the name of Jesus. There is no superhero dimension to this. Paul and Silas do not breeze through this untouched. Jesus got himself crucified when he challeneged the powers of this world. It is a sobering point. The gospel costs.

In prison Paul and Silas are at prayer and sing praise to God. How amazing! Here Paul and Silas, banged up in prison cell – pray and praise. Jesus never gave us permission to moan and criticise and judge and pull down and get angry and call others fools. His way was one of always loving, forgiving and seeking the best in others – knowing that each person was of great worth and value to God and he wanted them to see that. Of course Jesus got frustrated and angry, particularly at injustice and at self righteousness – but his angry had love at its root not hate. Can we be thankful in all circumstances as Paul writes in his letter. Can we praise God for all things – having the faith that God will be at work in all circumstances to bring good?

*Tom Fox, 54, a peace activist and a Quaker, was kidnapped in Iraq in November 2005 along with three other members of Christian Peacemaker Teams – Norman Kember being one of them. Fox was eventually separated from theothers; his dead body was discovered in Baghdad on March 9, 2006. The other hostages were rescued two weeks later.*

*One of his fellow captives wrote about Tom:*

During those first days of relentless, terrifying, excruciating uncertainty, Tom Fox drove into prayer the way a warrior might charge into battle. He turned his captivity into a sustained, unbroken meditation.

The chain that bound his wrist became a kind of rosary. He would picture someone: a member of his family, a member of the Iraq team or the CPT office, one of the captors – whoever he felt needed a prayer. Holding a link of the chain, he would breathe in and out, slowly, praying for the person he was holding in his mind. With the completion of each breath, he would pass a chain link through his thumband index finger.

Tom would lead our, Bible-less Bible study. The format was simple. The leader would recall as best he could a Bible passage, and we would reflect together on it according to a series of four questions: What is the main point of this passage to me? Is it true in my experience? What is difficult, challenging or confusing about the passage? How might this passage change my life?

Tom’s prayers were profound. They brought our suffering into dialogue with the vast suffering of the world. Again and again his prayers brought to mind other prisoners – security detainees in Iraq, illegal combatants in Guantanamo, the lost and forgotten souls in American penitentiaries. And every time we

heard a bomb explode, near or far, Tom would stop to

pray for those whose lives had just been destroyed.

Every time, without fail.

Why are we here? It’s the ultimate question, really. Tom reflected on that question in something he wrote titled “Why Are We Here?” on November 25, 2005, the evening before we were kidnapped. “We are here to root out all aspects of dehumanization that exist within us. We are here to stand with

those being dehumanized by oppressors and stand firm against that dehumanization. We are here to stop people, including ourselves, from dehumanizing any of God’s children, no matter how much they dehumanize their own souls.”

Every time I read these words, shivers ride up and down my arms. Amplified by their uncanny timing, these words were his last will and testament. His testament, what the arc of his life pointed to, the why of his “why are we here,” was what he called the Peaceable Realm of God, where the lion lies down

with the lamb, where every division is healed and fear is banished from every heart, and where rich and poor feast together at God’s banquet table. That vision was the light that guided Tom Fox.

Rest in the peace of God Tom Fox.

There is an earthquake and the prison doors fling open and the chains fall off. The jailor is amazed and terrified and realises that with the prisoners escaping he will have to pay for it with his life, so prepares to commit suicide. Paul reassures him that they are all still there. The jailor trembles with fear and cries out ‘what must I do to be saved?’

Salvation in the ancient world didn’t mean ‘going to heaven when you die’. Jesus often talked about someone being saved when he meant ‘healed’. Saved could mean delivered, rescued from whatever problem, be it sickness, financial disaster, personal catastrophe or anything else, might be threatening. The jailor was facing a death sentence for letting prisoners escape. He wasn’t asking these strange visitors for a detailed exposition of justification by grace through faith. His question is more like ‘how can I get out of this mess?’

‘Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ’ is always the answer to the question of how to be rescued, at whatever level and in whatever sense. When you ask the question ‘how can I get out of this mess’ the question is taken and deepened by the response ‘believe in the Lord Jesus’

When we are caught up in sin – the greed, selfishness, the exploitation – believing in the Lord Jesus is challenging those attitudes and behaviours – do they come under the Lordship of Christ. If you believe in Jesus you will follow his way – forgive – love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, (it’s in here – open your bibles – believe in the Lord Jesus). Can you find the way of Jesus out of your situation? In our fears and anxieties – do we believe in the Lord Jesus who walks with us and will care for us and protect us. In our grief – can we believe in the Lord Jesus – the Resurrection and the life – that death is swallowed up in victory and nothing can separate us from the Love of God.

Believing in the Lord Jesus Christ is the classic summary of what the Christian message or good news is all about. It isn’t about getting in touch with one’s inner spiritual self. It isn’t about committing yourself to good works, or a life of dutiful worship and church attending. It isn’t even about believing in some particular theory of how God deals with our sins or ‘saves us’. It is about recognizing, acknowledging and hailing Jesus Christ as Lord – confess with your lips, Jesus as Lord, believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead and you will be saved. The phrase ‘Jesus is Lord’ is what, from the earliest times, people said as they came for baptism, as the jailor and his household promptly did. As we hope Ada will one day.

That request came about because of the earthquake. God’s messengers are not protected from the sufferings that will come when their message challenged the easy smug rule of political, economic or spiritual forces. But God is not mocked. Vindication will come. We would prefer it if we could have the result without the process, the crown without the cross, but that is never the way in the kingdom of God.

Paul will face many more accusations and beatings and ultimately death in confessing that Jesus is Lord.

But here the world is turned upside down and a Roman jailor throws a party for two battered but rejoicing heralds of the Lord Jesus.

We may be battered and bruised but let us still rejoice in the hope we have through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Bibliography:

T Wright, Acts for Everyone, SPCK 2006