

Acts 16:16-34 Singing on the Rock Pile

This reading is a continuation of the story from last week when we focused on the coming of Christianity into Europe. In Philippi, Paul had met Lydia and other Jewish women down by the river at their place of prayer. Lydia became a Christian - believed to be the first European convert - and Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke stayed with her teaching and establishing the small Christian community. This story deals with 'what happened next'!

Although the account does start with a 'we' signifying the presence of the eyewitness, Luke, the author of the Acts, it changes into the third person when Paul and Silas become the focus.

Today's lesson from the travels of Paul is certainly about rejoicing even when the odds are stacked us; when rejoicing is really the last thing on one's mind - or even likely to cross one's mind. For me personally, when I am sitting on the rock pile of adversity, difficulties, when I feel the odds are stacked against me, I tend to feel rather like the children of Israel when they were in exile by the waters of Babylon. Remember their thoughts in Psalm 137: 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

Perhaps you are like me? When in despair, feeling alone, when feeling emotionally, spiritually imprisoned; sitting alone on the rock pile, when feeling in a strange land - do you echo these words with me "how can we sing the Lord's song".

Yet here are Paul and Silas singing their hearts out - almost leading a singsong. How can they do that!!!! Let's find out!

The first few verses of this reading from Acts 16 outline for us what went wrong and why they ran afoul of the city authorities. Luke tells us there was this young slave girl who could tell fortunes and she would follow Paul and company down to the prayer place calling out "These men are servants of the Most High God and they are telling you how to be saved". After a few days, Paul became troubled and prayed for her to be released from this spirit of evil within her.

With this action of healing, her owners became angry demanding reparation for the loss of their income. Consequently, Paul and Silas are dragged away to face the authorities. Perhaps it was that Luke and Timothy were not included because they were Gentiles and not Jews. Commentators tell us this event occurred during a wave of anti-Semitism, which spread across the Roman Empire after the expulsion of Jews from Rome by the Emperor Claudius in AD49.

You know, as I read this I kept coming back to the young slave girl whose life was so imprisoned ... imprisoned by this spirit and imprisoned by her owners who were forcing, using her, to make money. I hope that perhaps Lydia and her community took her under their wing after the healing, cared for her and she became a Christian. Perhaps returning at some point to her home country and sharing her experiences of the Risen Lord.

Meanwhile, Paul and Silas are facing the authorities with the crowds joining in the attack. They are accused of being Jews and of throwing the city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for Romans to accept or practice. Paul and Silas are stripped and flogged and put into prison with their feet in stocks and chained to the wall.

And so it comes to midnight, and what we find is Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns with the other prisoners listening to them. I would imagine too Paul and Silas are sharing the Gospel message. Suddenly there comes an earthquake with enough velocity so chains are pulled off the walls, the wooden slabs across the doors loosened and the men freed.

The poor jailer, who stood condemned if he lost any prisoners, rushes to check on what has happened and, in the darkness, certain that the prisoners would all escape, is about to kill himself rather than face the disgrace that would befall him.

However, Paul shouts "Do not harm yourself we are all here".

The jailer calls for light to be brought in, and seeing Paul and Silas, trembling, bows before them "Asking what must I do to be saved". This causes me to wonder if perhaps the jailer too had been

listening to the words of Paul and Silas in their prayers and hymns before sleeping. Then The Light comes to him and his household too as Paul and Silas say to him “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved - you and your household’.

Before he and his family were baptized, the jailer washed and bound up the wounds of Paul and Silas and then following the baptism, he invited Paul and Silas back to his home and set a meal before them. Luke writes, “the jailer was filled with great joy because he and his whole family had come to believe in God”.

The rest of the Chapter relates what happened the next morning. The Roman authorities ordered the release of Paul and Silas but the two men, as Roman citizens, demanded an apology from the public officials for being whipped. The speed with which the apology arrived indicates how well these local city officials knew the law, which placed them under threat of death for imprisoning and whipping Roman, citizens. Paul and Silas were escorted from the jail and asked to leave Philippi but before leaving, they had one last visit of encouragement to the home of Lydia and undoubtedly with the small Christian community now formed. I like to think the slave girl and the jailer and his family was present too.

This of course was not the last time the Paul would face imprisonment. He would be left ‘singing on the rock pile’ many times.

And yet, Paul could write these words to the folk, the church he founded in Philippi: Philippians 3 and 4 “Forgetting what is behind, I press onto reach the goal of my high calling - to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say Rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything. But in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. “

And further he writes “And the peace of God which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.”

Whenever and whatever was happening to him, Paul focused on God and God's love through Jesus Christ. Paul drew his strength from the Holy Spirit in his life. For Paul, nothing that happened to him and nothing that anyone did to him - no adversity, no difficulty, could ever take away from his belief in God and the presence of Jesus Christ. He could be stripped and flogged; imprisoned in stocks - chained to the walls; he could be thrown out of the cities; shipwrecked; stoned; stripped of all his dignity - YET, nothing would ever take from him his belief in Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God. As Paul wrote to the Christians gathered in Rome: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Fair enough, we can mutter: But that's the great apostle Paul and this is me; I don't have that type of faith. I am sure it was a struggle for Paul too - just like it is for us too. Listen carefully to this verse also from Philippians and why not spend this week reading it - there are only 4 chapters.

Here's what he writes: "for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength".

"I have learned". Paul has had to learn what he knows. Paul is telling us: I HAVE LEARNED how to be content in every situation - I have had to learn how to sing while on the rock pile. Paul had times of need and he had times of plenty. He had times when he was lauded, times when he was thrown out the back door. He learned through stumbling, by falling down and getting up again how to live God's way. A 'how to live as a child of God' handbook wasn't handed down to him all tied up with a nice pink bow by God. He had to learn how to live as God desires. This was the man who had originally opposed Christianity - he knew that unexpected gift of grace that had been given to him. And he unwrapped it thoughtfully; he reflected upon, he pondered it; he

prayed. And then he wrote it down in letter form and sent his learnings out to the churches. And this is what we have today “A how to book” ... all the more to read Philippians and the other letters to the early church.

When we are in the rough patches, out on the rock pile, when we do feel bound up in our emotional and spiritual concerns, when we ask “How can I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” This is the time when we need to be seeking the face of God and asking of God what am I to learn here?

Difficulties should not be a barrier to faith, hope and life. Yes, adversity can shake our inner security but it also presses home the question of what motivates us and can break through the façade of our comfortable life. It can cause us to ponder more deeply, dig more deeply into the question of faith “What do I believe”?

Difficulty happens in our lives but God is never outside the difficulty unless we put God there. “Whatever state I am in I have learnt to be content,” says Paul. Why - because God is there. And God is there with me and with you, with us. Again listen to Paul’s voice of experience: “For we know that all things work together for those who are the called accordingly to God’s purposes”. We need to be trusting - we need to be living in openness to God and the ways of God.

God is there with us. We cannot always change our difficult circumstances, but we can change our attitudes and feelings towards these circumstances. Yea, though I walk sit on the rock pile, yea though I walk through the darkness, You are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me.

Start singing and let Grace, mercy and love flow! Amen