

“WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?”

Acts 16:16-34

We were talking a few weeks ago about “*being redeemed*”. And then we mentioned last week about God’s “*salvation*”. They’re words and phrases that we are familiar with in our Christian vocabulary – or jargon, maybe – but not everyone necessarily knows what they mean. They’re pretty key elements in our Christian faith, so it might be as well to consider what we’re talking about when we use such language. And the best way to find out about what the Christian faith is all about is to look in the Bible – and most of the Bible is actually in the form of stories – stories that we can read and, often, identify with. So we’re going to look at one of those stories this morning and see if it can help us with the questions we might have about believing in Jesus. Then next week we’re going to look at another one which might help us to move on from this to consider what baptism is all about – again, with the help of a story. And both stories concern civil servants, as it happens – or, at least, the first century equivalent. We’ll start with the one we’ve just heard read.

Paul and Silas, two of the early Christians, are on a preaching tour. After a dream that Paul had, they have travelled to Philippi up in the region of Macedonia, in north-eastern Greece. It’s a Roman colony and, so far, completely unevangelised. This is pioneer missionary work – although there are one or two Jewish converts to Christianity who quietly get together to pray, the vast majority of the population are totally ignorant of the message of Jesus. It’s just a question of getting a group of curious people together and telling them about the gospel – no posters, no advertising campaign, no spot on local radio or whatever.

But then there’s an unexpected contribution to their publicity. Wherever they go, a slave girl follows them round telling everyone that Paul and Silas are “*servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved.*” (There’s that word already.) It’s great! Not only a person who in herself attracts a lot of attention, but she’s telling everyone who stops to see what’s going on that Paul and Silas are worth listening to. She’s actually possessed, she’s got a spirit – a fact that her owners capitalise on by getting her to tell fortunes. In Greek it’s called the “*Python spirit*” as the Greeks believed that such people were possessed by the spirit of the python from the Shrine at Delphi. No doubt Paul and Silas were glad of the publicity to start with, but Luke (the writer of this story) tells us that she kept it up for so long that in the end Paul got fed up with it. So he exorcised her – told the Python spirit to leave her alone in the name of Jesus Christ. And that’s just what happened. The spirit left her and she lost her psychic powers.

Unfortunately, her owner-managers are outraged. Their source of income has suddenly dried up. They are understandably mad at Paul and Silas and start to whip up the crowd. They resort to the usual device

for whipping up a crowd – they play on the fact that these are foreigners and are doing things that are unusual for citizens of a Roman colony: the anti-immigrant tactic that is now so successfully deployed by *Daily Mail* columnists and others.

Wound up by the slave-owner's anti-Semitic rhetoric, the crowd turns on Paul and Silas and the magistrates get involved – not to protect the two preachers, but to sentence them, without a trial, to whipping, imprisonment and the stocks. They are handed over to the city's jailer for their sentence to take effect.

Now the jailer was an important figure in a Roman city – a civil servant. He had complete control of what went on in the prison and could do pretty well what he wanted. It was job which normally brutalised the person involved – he would show no mercy and would probably have derived quite a bit of sadistic pleasure from meting out the punishment. If you've seen Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ*, you'll have seen how the Roman soldiers who flogged Jesus behaved – taking real delight in another's suffering – and that's very much like the jailer would have been, here and elsewhere.

Paul and Silas are put in the high-security cell and are locked into the stocks – which must have been excruciatingly painful after their severe flogging. However, they try to keep their spirits up by praying and singing hymns. I'm always intrigued by Luke's comment here that "*the other prisoners were listening to them*". I've even heard people preach about how inspiring Paul and Silas must have seemed if the others took the trouble to listen to them. These are prisoners. They would have been chained to the wall. It was the middle of the night and there were very few other sounds. They had no choice but to listen to them!

But around midnight there is a violent earthquake and the prison is shaken to the extent that all the doors burst open. Now you don't really want to be in charge of a prison with all the doors open in the middle of the night. The jailer, although he had complete control in the prison, was also the one who was held completely responsible for what went on. Under the *Code of Justinian* (Article 9, subsection 4.4, if you must know), one of the Roman laws which covered issues of justice, any jailer who lost a prisoner would thereby be subject to the penalty they should have had. And Roman penalties were not things like community service or electronic tagging. It would almost certainly mean death and at the very least could mean losing a limb.

So imagine you're the jailer in this situation. The earthquake would have been bad enough on its own – after all, violent earthquakes are pretty scary events. But on top of that, the jailer knows the doors have opened and, if they've got any sense, any prisoners who aren't actually chained to the walls will be

starting to make their escape. He is not going to last long either in his job or in his life. So he gets ready to end it all there and then – pulls out a sword and prepares for hara-kiri. But somehow in the darkness Paul sees what he's about to do and reassures him that all the prisoners are still in place – maybe they are all actually chained up or in the stocks.

The jailer then comes into Paul and Silas's cell, shaking like a leaf and asks, "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" Now I know we can never really know what was going through the jailer's mind, but I suspect that this was not a theological question. The man is an emotional wreck. He's just experienced a violent earthquake. His jail is falling down. He was a few moments ago ready to kill himself rather than be executed by his superiors. And then there was the relief of discovering that, in fact, all his prisoners were still there. But now, how is he going to keep them there? I don't really think that he is now asking Paul and Silas to explain the gospel of Jesus because he's rather curious about what they were preaching earlier on. This is not an enquiry about church membership – it's a desperate man asking what the heck he's going to do now his world has quite literally fallen down around his ears. He's under pressure and panicking and has no idea what he has to do to save his own skin. But Paul and Silas seem to have something going for them if they can respond to a cruel and unjust punishment with a certain amount of calm by singing hymns.

Paul, though, knows that whatever the situation and whatever the motivation for the man's question, there is only one answer, \as we were saying last week – Jesus. That's always the first answer. The details can be sorted out later on, but the first thing is to believe in Jesus. That's what the first Christians always say – read through the rest of the book of *Acts* and you'll see that's the case. "*Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.*" Paul doesn't say to the jailer, "Oh you're a bit wound up at the moment. You won't be able to make a informed decision, so calm down and then we'll talk." He doesn't sign him up for the first-century equivalent of the Alpha Course. He doesn't give him a booklet to read and tell him to come back when he's read it. "*Believe in Jesus!*" – there is no other answer. And that belief is encouraged without any real understanding on the jailer's part. There was a call to commitment – and the rest can be worked out later.

Luke does tell us that Paul and Silas "*spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in the house.*" But it couldn't have taken long because the jailer cleaned them all up and was baptised before the sun came up. This whole thing happened within the space of less than five hours, I reckon. Now we don't know what happened afterwards, but I would imagine that the jailer was then given the opportunity to learn more about Jesus and to grow in his new-found faith, rather than having to get it all sorted out before he could be baptised, as we tend to do. This is the story of a man who was panicking, who was under immense pressure, who had reached the end of his own resources, who was so close to the end of

his tether that he was prepared to commit suicide – and he was invited simply to believe in Jesus as a way of discovering a higher power, a deeper resource, a lasting source of comfort.

How about you? Are you, like the jailer, struggling with the demands of the job you're in? Things haven't gone right recently and you're scared of the consequences. You're trying to cope on your own, but things are not going well. Are you anxious about people round you – your family, close friends, colleagues? Are you under pressure because of your situation – financially, health-wise, relationships? You're panicking because you don't know what the future holds for you. You might be emotionally wrung out at the moment and you just don't know where to turn. You want to be saved from all this hassle and all these problems. I'd say to you, as Paul said to the jailer, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus*". Just hang on to the promises he made. Stick with him, the higher power, because you can't get through this on your own.

Now some people would say that that's all a bit simplistic – and it's also a bit dishonest, calling people to faith when they're feeling upset and vulnerable. But surely that's when you need faith, when you need something to hang on to, when you need the support of something, someone beyond yourself. I guess most of you here this morning believe in Jesus already. You may need to renew, refresh that belief because of your circumstances: remind yourself that it's real for a particular situation.

There may be some of you who have toyed with the idea of belief, but there are too many unanswered questions and you're scared of committing yourself until you understand it all. Let me assure you of this: you will never understand it all and the longer you put off taking that step the more difficult it will become. A couple of weeks ago we quoted St Augustine who said, "*We do not seek to understand so that we might believe: we believe that we might understand.*" That jailer, unless he was some kind of theological and philosophical genius, could never have understood the entire gospel in a couple of hours. He believed, then grew into it.

There may even be some here this morning who are pretty well where the jailer was. You haven't got a clue what this is all about, but you know you need someone to believe in. Are you, like the jailer, so close to end of your tether that you're prepared to risk believing in Jesus? I don't really believe there's any other way, that there's hope in anything or anyone else. There's a song called "*I Came To Believe*", written by and sung by Johnny Cash. It's on the last album he recorded, with producer Rick Rubin, just before his death. He knew he was dying and you can hear the emotion and the faith in his voice. Johnny Cash led a very chequered life, constantly battling with his inner demons and the habits and dependencies which dogged him to the very end. But he knew that he needed help to get by and that help was in the higher power, the Comforter, Jesus Christ. "*In childlike faith I gave in and gave him a try*" – and it worked for Johnny Cash, as it worked for the jailer in Philippi and as it has worked for tens of millions of people down through the centuries. Don't ignore it. And if you think that might be what you need, then

please don't leave this morning without talking to me – or someone else here whom you know is a Christian – about it.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

There are no separate notes this week – it was a bit difficult to distil the sermon into a few points – but the text of the sermon and an audio version are available on the Church website.

- 1) What do you think of when you hear the words "redeemed" and "salvation"? How would you explain them to someone who has no experience or knowledge of Christianity?
- 2) The Jailer was an emotional wreck when he asked Paul how to be saved. Is it wrong to talk about faith to people in such circumstances?
- 3) Some people say that Christianity is just a crutch for people who can't cope. How do you respond to that?
- 4) The Jailer and his whole family were baptised with a few hours (at the most) of his conversion. What issues does that raise for you? (e.g. Wasn't it a bit soon? Did all his family really believe?)
- 5) How could we best disciple those who have just become Christians?

Pray for each other that you might be able to spot and use opportunities to share the Gospel with others.