

The Lord of whom?

29 May 2022

Acts 16.16-34

Sunday after Ascension

Revelation 22.12-14,16-17, 20-21

Rev. Alan Keeler

John 17.20-26

Ascension

The last two years has brought all sorts of challenges. In terms of worship there have been various things which have been more simple not least in having the service on A4 card instead of a booklet. This has meant a variety of short creeds.

The Christian faith has been very much fashioned by agreeing on creeds that express what we believe. The main one is the Nicene Creed and there is one line just to bring to mind at this time.

On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Our celebration of Easter rejoices in Jesus resurrection and that death is defeated. Jesus' resurrection is also the vindication of who he is as the true human who is also fully divine.

But that line from the Nicene Creed says that Jesus is risen, ascended and seated in heaven. Jesus rose from the grave and he is not with us now because he is in heaven.

Jesus as fully divine and seated in heaven has a grandeur and authority which could seem very remote. However as we read the Acts of the Apostles we find Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit on his Apostles. The accounts we find are of Jesus heavenly ministry continuing in very earthly situations. In our reading from Acts today we met two people whose lives were greatly transformed by Jesus through the Apostles.

The psychic slave girl

Paul and Silas were travelling through what we would now call Greece and in the town of Philippi. They gain the attention of a girl and they become annoyed with what she is doing.

Acts says: One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.

The girl seems to have an extraordinary psychic gift whereby she can tell fortunes. She has no

name but let us call her Psyche. What must life have been like for her?

People with such gifts turn up in various places in the Bible and whatever we make of them I think we can say they are not at ease with themselves. Their behaviour is disturbing to them and other people. In his ministry Jesus wanted to rid people of these experiences.

Let us imagine that Psyche does not have a happy life. In fact she may have a lonely life. It is hard to relate to people whose thinking and understanding is so different from ours. Not only that but she is in the hands of people that own her, she is a slave. Her masters are only interested in their financial gain.

Psyche is enslaved within her own life and her situation is to be enslaved to others greed.

Paul and Silas pray for her and she is freed within her mind and her soul. Here is the continuing healing ministry of Jesus. Paul and Silas act immediately to bring her release and health. It is a gracious act. It is not about a religious conversion let alone promises of changed behaviour.

The risen and ascended Jesus is at work in the world by his Spirit through people who are faithful to him.

Being the healed

There is a Christian writer whom I really like called John Drain. He is a teacher of the New Testament. In one place he wrote about going to an impoverished country far away and meeting with some fellow Christians. they spent some time in study and the passage in question was that of the Good Samaritan.

The people very quickly identified with the man who was robbed and left for dead. John Drain was taken aback. He was so familiar to the passage being used to encourage people to be Good Samaritans and do good works. But the people he was with had hard lives and wanted their faith to give them value as people and strength for the tasks they had to do.

So in this account of Paul, Silas and Psyche who are we? I almost feel that if we do not allow ourselves at least part of the time to be a Psyche we are missing out. There will be things about our lives where we feel of no consequence, hurt and lost. Indeed if we wanted to be a Paul who is eloquent and commanding we must listen to some of his writings where he describes being at

his wits end and found although he was very weak, Jesus was just as present if not more so.

In our faith we worship the Lord Jesus Christ. We only have to look at our great East window to see him displayed in glory, authority and power. But he remains truly compassionate, present in the smallest human situation and prepared to bring salvation and healing.

The Terrified Jailer

The second person that we meet is a jailer. Having healed Psyche her owners see their livelihood is ruined, cause a riot, so Paul and Silas are punished.

In Acts we read: after they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.

When we read on we find that the jailer has a very fearful life. He is not given a name, but let's call him Warden.

We can imagine Warden having a job and responsibilities. Warden is not a slave but that does not mean he is promised good terms and conditions. He is at the bottom of the system with a very menial task of making sure prisoners do not escape. Warden may receive pay but he is not really valued he could easily be replaced and he could also easily be seriously punished.

This matter of punishment is demonstrated when after an earthquake Warden fears the prisoners have escaped.

in Acts we read: when the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.

There is a proverb that goes 'a life lived in fear is a life half lived'. If you have seen Baz Luhrmann's film *Strictly Ballroom* you will have come across this saying.

Warden only has only half a life even before something happens to bring him trouble. He is far from at ease and his responsibilities are crushing.

But following the earthquake Paul, Silas and the other prisoners have not escaped. What might they have represented to Warden. They are under judgement and yet they are not taking the first opportunity to escape. They are not ruled by fear Paul and Silas have a dignity and confidence that must have spoken powerfully to Warden.

In his fear of what might happen to him, but also let us say out of inspiration from the lives that Paul and Silas demonstrate Warden cries out, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' He has seen his need and believes that these people can rescue him. Again like Psyche there is no great theological exchange or promise about what the future might be. Paul and Silas simply say 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved'. Warden may not know quite what this involves but Paul and Silas know that in Jesus there is salvation from sin, there is resurrection from the dead and Jesus authority is present to save.

Our passage ended: Warden brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

How wonderful that Warden was transformed from terror to joy, from a half life to a whole life.

Paul's power

If we read beyond the ending of our passage we find the authorities trying to let Paul and Silas out on the quiet. But they are having none of it they demand that the magistrates come and speak with them. They obtain an apology and are able to continue their ministry, which is contentious to other people, with confidence.

Paul and Silas understand the authority of Jesus. It is present in unlikely and unvalued places. It transforms people from being troubled, enslaved and fearful to finding their lives flourishing because of Jesus Christ risen and ascended.

Walk through the Bible

Yesterday as part of Marvellous May we had an event called Old Testament Live. There was much to take in and many insightful things to hear. It was led by a fellow called Kevin Vickers. At one point Kevin described Jacob wrestling with God and coming away wounded. Kevin said he remembers being told 'nobody could be a Christian leader unless he had been wounded.' There are too many ways of being proud, demanding and trophy hunting that are not about the ways of God. Indeed we can all seek to project lives that are successful, prosperous and confident. But there will be the times when we are like Psyche and Warden. The experiences are not to be denied, They may be a special place to meet with Jesus. They will make us all the more human, confident that God cares for us and equipped to love those around us.