

## OF EXPLOITATION AND LOOSENEED CHAINS

16 May 2010 (Easter 7)

**Text:**

**Acts 16:16-34**

In recent weeks the people of Tasmania have been appalled at the case of a twelve year old girl who was used for the purposes of prostitution. It is sickening to think of the exploitation of this child used to make money for her mother and her mother's partner. Our hearts reach out to the poor girl, a victim of the greed of others. What chance would a 12-year old have of resisting the callousness of those who were using her? All the evidence about sexual abuse would suggest that as that girl grows into adulthood and even old age the damage will never be repaired. That such things can happen is a blight on our society.

Today's story of the slave girl in Acts 16 also tells of the exploitation of a young girl for financial gain. In the Biblical story it is not sexual exploitation, but exploitation of a disturbed mental or emotional disease which led her to make wild utterances which were sometimes seen as fortune-telling for which other people were willing to pay. So the owners of that slave girl made a handsome profit from her ravings. One day she followed Paul around, calling out things about him and his followers. What she said was not abusive, but probably not sincere either. Be that as it may Paul got sick of her heckling in the background. He was clearly annoyed, so using the name of Jesus he exorcised the harmful spirit in her. The owners of the slave girl were incensed. Suddenly they had lost a lucrative source of income.

Their revenge was to complain to the authorities that Paul and Silas were disturbing the peace. Paul and Silas were flogged and put into the maximum security section of the prison. But that wasn't the end of the story. That same night at around midnight there was an earthquake, the prison doors were thrown open, the chains holding the prisoners were broken but no prisoner took the opportunity to escape. The jailor was awakened by the earthquake, saw the doors open, immediately surmised that his prisoners had escaped and to save getting the blame prepared to suicide until Paul told him not to harm himself because they were still there. The jailor was so impressed that he became a follower of Jesus.

Now over these four Sundays I have used some stories in the book of Acts to identify some glimpses of the life of the church in the first decades following the earthly life of Jesus, and to see how they might guide the our church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What then of today's story? There is certainly a warning about the exploitation of the vulnerable, and that was consistent with the ministry of Jesus to outcasts and others outside mainstream society. As we think of the vulnerable it may not only be for financial gain that people are exploited. They can be exploited by being neglected, or by taking advantage of their powerlessness, or even by abuse through taking them for granted, or capitalising too much on their willingness to assist. The gospel in which our life values are grounded demands love, care and compassion to all, not because of what others can do for us, but because all people are inherently a person who is loved by God and for whom Christ died.

In the story the slave girl was, on the one hand, a source of revenue for her owners, but to Paul she was a nuisance. Her constant comments in the background annoyed him, but rightly or wrongly she exploited the situation to command Paul's attention. Exploitation can be used for positive purposes. It is when exploitation is used for unworthy purposes that it offends the gospel values by which we live.

When Paul's prison chains were broken, he exploited the situation, not for personal gain, but to open the way for proclaiming the good news of Jesus. He chose to not escape, he saved the prison officer from a suicide attempt and exploited the situation in a thoroughly positive way. No one was harmed or disadvantaged. It is a reminder that as we make the most of our opportunities we need to ensure that we act in ways consistent with genuine respect for all or any persons who are involved.

So that's my first main point today: Exploit opportunities for good, but do not exploit people. That was one of the marks of the early church. The apostles and leaders knew what they were on about, eager to promote the message about Jesus, keen to establish a vital and vibrant community of Christians, and they maximised most of the opportunities that came their way. Such an attitude challenges our level of eagerness to promote the message of Jesus, our keen-ness to grow the church as a vital and vibrant community, rather than our current tendency to just drift hoping that something will happen. For something to happen people need to be act – and that means you and me.

Now while we are talking about church growth in the early church, notice the variety of converts in this little passage. Last week we heard of the conversion of Lydia (a well respected businesswoman). Today it is a much less respected raving slave. Then later in the story there is the jailor – again a not particularly respected person. After all he was an official of the hated Roman Empire. Three very diverse people, but the message about Jesus was given to all types and embraced by all types. So a very obvious challenge to the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to present the Jesus story to all types and to welcome all types into the Christian community, and not just the respectable types.

Most congregations of the Christian church in Australia are made up of pretty respectable types. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the church in western society is essentially respectable middle class. But that is not true of the church of the first century. That church was extraordinarily diverse in the types of people who joined. I long for those days to return.

This story from Acts 16 also reminds us that being a Christian can land us in an uncomfortable place. Paul and Silas found that their eagerness for Jesus and the power of the risen one landed them in jail, not until after they had been publicly flogged, and then when taken to the jail their legs were shackled. Not a situation to be envied. Imprisonment was a reality for many early church leaders, and over the centuries many more have been jailed because of their teaching of the Christian faith.

Now few of us will face the prospect of imprisonment because of our faith, but our obedience to the faith may put us in an uncomfortable place or an uncomfortable state. In this day and age people may still pay a heavy price for their commitment to the ways of Jesus. Our obedience to Jesus Christ may cost us friends who cannot accept our priorities. For some Christians over the years faithfulness to the gospel made them an object of ridicule

by the public, or the press. Our insistence on ethical standards in business may cost us clients or lose us contracts. Our adherence to gospel values may mean that how we spend our money baffles those close to us. There are all kinds of ways in which people of God can find that by the standards of the world they pay a price for being a Christian.

But this is not something to complain about. Did Paul and Silas complain when they were unjustly thrown into jail? Do you remember what they were doing as midnight approached? They were singing hymns to God. Now this was long before Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts wrote their great hymns, but in every age there were hymns and songs which were imprinted on the minds of believers and sung as expressions of faith hope and love.

So, if there are times when your embracing of the Christian faith or your acceptance of the lordship of Christ puts you in a situation of discomfort, or in some way is costly for you, take comfort from that image of Paul and Silas singing in the dark in that prison at Philippi. [And as an aside, if you want to have more songs and hymns imprinted on your mind our music group here would love you to join them.]

Finally I want to point you to the image of chains being unfastened, shackles being loosed and people being freed from their restraints. That's what happened to Paul and Silas in the jail at Philippi. The same thing can happen to anyone. Let's not be too anxious about whether or not there really was that earthquake in the middle of the night. The important thing for us is that this is an image of people being freed from the things that hold them back, freed from being chained to something that prevented them from being where they would like to be. The story proclaims that in the power of the risen One we are released from whatever holds power over us and freed to make a fresh start.

Is anything holding you where you are? Is anything preventing you from moving on? Are there chains binding you? From what do you seek release? Is there some chain that binds you to one way of thinking or one way of acting? The image of Paul and Silas breaking free of their shackles is there to help you too know the power of Christ to set you free.

Grasp that spiritual power and be freed to be the person you were created to be.

To the praise of the name that is timeless and the love that is boundless.

Amen.

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