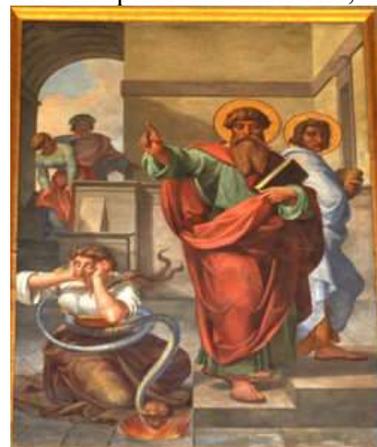




This Sunday used to be known as the Sunday after Ascension, and, picking up a theme a previous vicar of mine, when I lived in New Barnet in London, once used, I would often feel moved to say something today about the strange period of waiting between the excitement of the Ascension last Thursday and the rush of new excitement with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Whit, next Sunday. This is a theme that I like because most of our lives are not lived in a state of ecstasy, but, even if they are generally comfortable and content, are lived at a much more mundane level – the level of the Sunday after Ascension.

Now, however, today is called the Seventh Sunday of Easter, and we are continuing our mandatory reading through some of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and today's reading is anything but mundane. It features most prominently Paul, along with Silas and Luke, continuing his evangelistic mission in Philippi on the Macedonian coast. As we know, Paul brought all his religious fervour with which, as Saul, he persecuted the infant church, now, after his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, in support of the gospel of that same church. This day, they were going to the place of prayer for the Jews of the town (the place, by the river, where he had recently encountered Lydia, who had gone on to be baptised) when they encountered the slave girl who made a living for her master by the exercise of her 'spirit of divination' – telling the future. Somehow, this girl recognises something of the truth in Paul and his companions that they were 'slaves of the Most High God'. This name 'Most High God' was one sometimes used by gentiles to identify the God of the Jews, and by its use indicates an awareness of the difference between Jewish monotheism and their own pantheistic view of the world. The slave girl goes on to assert that Paul is offering a 'way of salvation'. It seems to me that this slave-girl was really onto something – she had seen into the heart of Paul's message and seems to recognise it as a potential force for good.

Now you might think that Paul would welcome this external validation, and try to build on it, but, as this happens day after day it seems that Paul gets fed up with her disruptive outbursts and, invoking



the name of Jesus Christ, carries out an effective exorcism, which deprives the girl of her insight, and, in so doing, cuts off an income stream for her master. Why, I

wonder, did Paul react in this way? We know that he was anxious to preserve the integrity of the gospel message and to guard against it becoming corrupted by people who did not fully understand the message, but I suspect that there was also something of the control freak about Paul.

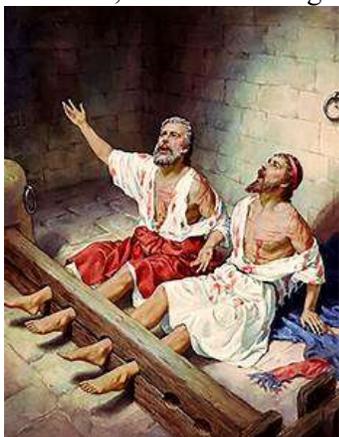
This brings me on to a key point for me in this story – the idea of being careful what we wish for. This is something we come across in everyday life – we wish for something; sometimes we get what we wish for, and then find, when it is too late, that we had not realised the full implication of that for which we had wished. This is a common experience – from the three wishes granted to Aladdin by the genie of the lamp in the pantomime, to our more everyday experience. Paul just seems exasperated by the interruptions of this slave girl and wants to be left alone to get on with his missionary work without the girl providing a commentary on it to every passer-by. The spirit of divination leaves her – ‘hooray’ for Paul, left in peace – but ‘boo’ for the girl’s masters who have had their income stream cut off at source. They do not take that lying down and press to have Paul and Silas arrested by the authorities,



using the old argument, so frequently successful in societies where law and order are fragile, and where a popular uprising can be all too successful, that they were disturbing the peace of the city by inciting populace to adopt customs that were not lawful under Roman rule. The authorities, fearing an uprising, I suppose, seize Paul and Silas immediately, have



them flogged and then put in prison. This, one imagines, is not what Paul had mind when he spoke out against the girl. He had just wanted to get on with his proselytising work without her interruptions, but now they have been interrupted much more fundamentally, as Paul is chained up in a prison cell with no prospect of continuing his work. Perhaps he now wished he had been more careful in framing his desire to have the girl silenced. We don’t know, but we are told that, whatever his regrets, he and Silas were, about midnight, praying and singing



hymns to God. (I bet that went down well with the other prisoners, who were wanting to get to sleep!) Then comes the earthquake that opens up the prison without harming the inmates, and frees the prisoners, who make no attempt to escape. The gaoler is terrified – not only by the natural disaster that has destroyed the prison, but also by the thought that the prisoners, who had been in his safe keeping, would by now all have escaped – he had entirely failed in his duty, so he

decides to commit suicide, until Paul speaks to reassure him that none of the prisoners have grabbed at the opportunity to escape, but that all are very much still present.



Now the gaoler realises that he is in the presence of some sort of power that he does not understand and, in an instant recognises that Paul and Silas carry with them the means of salvation. He has seen what the slave-girl saw, but in his case not through some supernatural power residing in him, but from somewhere deep inside himself. He, and his family go



on to be baptised.

Where does this craving for salvation come from? What is it that the gaoler wants to be saved from? He appears to have a steady job, we know that he has a family; by the standards of the time he probably enjoyed a comfortable life. So what is it that was the big gap in his life? This morning's reading ends with the answer. He and his household 'rejoiced that he had become a believer in God'. It was the absence of God that was the yawning gap in his life. He probably didn't realise it before, and certainly not at first when he was woken by the earthquake in the middle of the night, but he came to realise it suddenly when confronted by the fact that the prisoners had not fled.

Are we to draw any conclusions for ourselves from this story, other than marvel at the growth of the church in the early days, even in the most unpromising of circumstances? Our lives seem so settled and commonplace in comparison with the circumstances of so many of the characters in the Acts of the Apostles. We also are already members of Christ's church, so perhaps would not expect to feel God absent from our lives. On the other hand the very settled nature of our lives reduces the pressure on us to consider very closely, or very often, where we stand in relation to God. It can often be in times of crisis, when our routines are shattered and our plans disrupted that we consider such a fundamental question seriously. It is then, having no immediate recourse to a S. Paul, that we can draw on our reserves of faith to find God present as ever in our lives, and to trust in Him.



I think that S. Paul had come to realise that he did not need to be careful what he wished for because he had come to be certain that God would be with him no matter how things turned out. I pray that I may know that to be true for me, and that it is true for you.

Clive Lemmon