

Liberating Lord

Thursday of this past week, as you will be aware, was Ascension Day, when we celebrate the ending of Jesus' physical presence on earth and his return to from whence he came, 'sitting down at the right hand of the majesty on high', as the Bible puts it. This was the enthronement of Jesus, Lord of life and conqueror of death, over everything. And as I hope will become clear, that is a great background to our reading from the Book of Acts this morning.

Paul and his companions are travelling round the ancient world, proclaiming Jesus as Lord, and they are in the city of Philippi and what strikes us about the scene here is that everyone is in need of liberation. Everyone is captive in one way or another. So we read of a slave-girl who has a spirit of divination – she is possessed in some way by a spirit who prompts her to follow Paul and his companions and to cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!' And surely she is possessed of some insight and discernment but this spirit who animates her is not of God, it is evil, and this slave-girl is in need of release and Paul casts the spirit out – hallelujah!

There are, however, some who are not well-pleased at this. The slave-girl, after all, is possessed not just by an evil spirit. She is possessed too by evil men who make money out of her – 'a great deal of money', we're told. Here we encounter the great god Mammon and with it one of the most wicked and pervasive forms of evil: the alliance between religion and money. Religion, after all, can be big business and it often is – whether it is medieval Catholicism effectively selling grace and salvation, or whether it is TV evangelists conning poor people out of their money. Too often the Church and Mammon form easy bed-fellows. Money enslaves, and these predatory men in Philippi - and not just their slave-girl - are in need of liberation from it.

There is more, however. Outraged at the loss of their revenue the slave-girl's owners drag Paul and his companion Silas before the city authorities. And just listen to what they say: 'these men are disturbing our city, they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans...' Get that? Yes, they are playing the race card. 'These people are foreigners – they're not like us! They disturb our peace!' And here of course is another power that enslaves us: racism, xenophobia, fear of 'the other'. These slave-owners are

captive to race as well as to money, and indeed, given that they are men exploiting a slave-girl, we might as well go the whole way and recognise that they are also tainted by a strong dose of sexism and misogyny. And that is Philippi for you – a microcosm of our world and the same old story: evil spirits, money, racism, sexism. The same old captivities.

But then, something different. Paul and Silas are punished for disturbing the peace and then they are captives too, in a jail cell. Only their captivity is different. Just look at them – or rather listen to them! They are singing, for while their bodies are in chains their spirits are free. And why? Well, we'll come back to that. But first, there is one more person in need of liberation: the jailer who guards Paul and Silas. For suddenly there is an earthquake and Paul and Silas are freed and that's bad news for the jailer. He's in deep trouble – he will be executed for allowing his prisoners to escape! And he cries out, 'what must I do to be saved?' And we have invested that cry with all kinds of baggage as if this man was asking how he could attain salvation, how he can get to heaven. But he isn't. That's not what is on his mind. One commentator has suggested that this jailer's cry of 'what must I do to be saved' is best translated, 'how do I get out of this mess? And back comes the answer, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...' Believe on the Lord Jesus and let him sort out this mess, for you and your household.'

Now, note what Paul is doing here. He is pointing this jailer to Jesus, the Lord Jesus – in other words to the ascended Jesus who is Lord of all, and this brings us back to where we started. You see it is the ascended Lord who broods over this whole passage. It is the ascended Lord who is exalted over the exploited slave-girl; and who is exalted over the men who are oppressors but who are themselves oppressed; and who is exalted over jailer who is bound by fear for his life; and who is exalted over Paul and Silas in their jail cell, and here's something interesting. Note how Paul and Silas are described originally by the slave-girl. She follows them crying out 'these are slaves of the Most High God.' And she's right. They are slaves too. But they are a very different kind of slave of a very different kind of master. Paul and Silas are slaves of the ascended Christ, the liberating Lord. And that kind of slavery enables you to sing even when you are chained hand and foot in a prison cell. That kind of slavery liberates the human spirit. That kind of slavery that defies the deathly powers that try to rule this world.

To be a slave of the ascended Christ who rules over all is to be a slave of no-one or nothing else – and thus to be gloriously free. And it's that Christ who invites us here to this table to celebrate our liberation and release. Here in bread and wine the ascended Lord gives himself to us. And he gives himself freely: pure gift with nothing to pay. Amen.

O holy God, gracious and sovereign one,
ruler over all,
you are to be praised and worshipped;
you are to be honoured and adored.

We worship you, God of Jesus Christ,
crucified, risen and ascended and who we confess as Lord;
We worship you, God of Jesus Christ,
who is Lord over every power, visible and invisible,
who is Lord over every throne and dominion and authority
in heaven and on earth;
We worship you, God of Jesus Christ,
Lord of our lives.
We bow before your majesty and praise your holy name.

O God forgive our failures to allow you to reign in our lives.
Forgive our capitulation to the ways of the world,
forgive our collusion with the world system that steals life from people;
forgive our compromises with lesser lords that would lead us astray.

Hear us, ascended Lord, as we confess to you our sins and failures.

Lord Jesus Christ, ascended and sovereign one, send upon us your Holy Spirit to assure us of your grace and forgiveness;
Send into our hearts the Holy Spirit of resistance that we may prevail in our struggle to follow and to obey you. We pray in your name. Amen.