

Sermon: **Strong and steady under stress**

Acts 16: 16-34 - Paul & Silas in prison in Philippi

Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Silvia Purdie, Sunday 2 June 2019

May the God of all creation shake us to the core
and build us strong upon his word,
the living word, Jesus Christ, Amen.

So, we're in the book Acts at the moment, in these weeks after Easter leading through to Pentecost, the Acts of the Apostles it's called. And today we find ourselves in the acts of Paul and Silas who for the first time, but certainly not for the last time, find themselves thrown in prison.

Things had been going pretty well in Philippi. Last week you explored the story of Lydia and the encounter at the river. Barbara explored the idea of the meeting, and the river itself, being a 'thin place', and how we can all experience, or even in ourselves become, thin places of meeting with God.

Remember that Paul and Silas had had a very clear sense of calling and direction to go to Philippi. Paul had had a vision from God in the night, a man begging them, pleading with Paul - "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

So, straight away, the team, including Luke, our author, packed up, caught the next ship going that way, and headed straight to the main town, Philippi.

Within a week they had planted the beginnings of a church, at Lydia's house, they were enjoying hospitality at her place, they were engaging with the local people, it was going well. But obviously they were upsetting some people, or maybe people in Philippi were upset about other things and looking for someone to blame, someone from out of town, someone who didn't seem to be trying to fit in, like good Romans should. So, when an angry slave owner started shouting accusations at them, the mob joined in. Rocks were thrown, violent words. There's nothing more terrifying to me than mob violence. It is the ugliest face of human nature, capable of the worst atrocities.

The Roman empire was capable of terrible atrocities, too, of course, carried out by the book, with clinical precision – the other side of humanity's ugly face - calculated cruelty, institutional fine-tuned capacity to inflict maximum pain for minimum cost.

Philippi's justice was swift and vicious. Paul and Silas were immediately stripped of their clothes and beaten, with exactly the right number of hits to batter them without killing them. No one heard them say that they were Roman Citizens. No one was interested in their defence. They were troublemakers, to be punished then expelled from the city. That was that. That's just what happened.

So, there they were, half naked, bleeding, chained, squashed in to a Roman holding pen, at midnight.

And what were the Acts of the Apostles? How are Paul and Silas coping? They are not weeping, begging, or swearing. They are not abusing the jailer. They are not humiliating their fellow prisoners or feeling humiliated themselves. No, they are praying aloud and singing. Singing. It does not take much imagination to grasp how painful that would be when the skin on your back is torn open and bleeding. Singing is the last thing I would feel like doing.

So this is the first thing I want to highlight this morning. Prayer and song in the place of pain. Paul and Silas were not super-human. They were just men, but they had met with the living God. They knew the spirit of Jesus Christ. And so, in their place of extreme pain, they chose to pray, to give thanks, to pray blessing on the people around them. Despite their physical agony they chose to sing.

Music is so important for faith. We sing here in Church, but I encourage to listen to Christian music at home as well, for the songs stay in your mind, deepening faith and grooving in truth.

Paul and Silas didn't just suddenly start to pray and sing in that prison – they did that because that's what they did. They had learned that prayer and song was a great way to get through tough times. If you want to be strong and steady in the face of stress, you need to practice. It's no good hoping to suddenly be calm when trouble comes. We need to lay down skills of staying calm, finding strength, holding steady, every day. That is the work of the spirit of Jesus in us, tuning our ears to a different beat, orientating us to a different compass.

The singing of Paul and Silas had a strange effect on the whole prison. The chief guard did what he was absolutely forbidden to do – he fell asleep. That's how the peace of God, ringing out through their song, affected him.

And then, of course, the darndest thing happened. An earthquake. Short, sharp, you know what that's like, the terrible noise of it, the tipping and tearing of it, the crashing of stones. It quite ripped their chains from the walls, and the doors fell in.

And after the quake, silence and darkness. No one dared to move. Then the jailer gropes his way in and they could hear his terror and his sword pulled from its sheath, and somehow Paul realises that he is doing, and calls out – “Don't harm yourself! We're all here!”

What an amazing message for anyone who feels like harming themselves. Don't hurt yourself. We're here. When we had our suicide prevention workshop here a couple of years ago that was the key verse, the key message, for young people standing in the place of darkness and loneliness. Don't harm yourself. We're here for you.

So this is the second Act of the Apostles for this morning: in the stress of the earthquake and the threat of a jailer brandishing a sword, they called out to him with compassion, they cared about him as a person. Love under stress.

And this has an astonishing effect on the jailer. In that moment he finds himself utterly outside of everything he knew before. He quite loses his rule book. Every other task, every other priority, everything that used to matter to him crumbles away, like the prison doors. Two things become suddenly important. First – and you Christchurch people can totally relate to this – he just wants to be with his family. As chief jailer he lives onsite, just upstairs from the prison, so obviously he wants to know if his family is safe. But also, also, he suddenly wants what Paul and Silas have got – he wants the peace and strength that they sang, that kept them there, that made them care even about him, their jailer. And so he takes Paul and Silas with him, home to meet the family. Hey, why not?!

So, next thing, there they are in the jailer's house. Sure, it's cracked, and still shaking, but everyone is OK, and they pick up the chairs and sit down and there in the middle of the night by lamplight they meet each other. And the Chief Jailer, who is used to being in charge, in control, he's the boss, he kneels down at Paul's feet and ask the single most powerful question in all of scripture: “How can I be saved?”

What must I do? What will it take?

Have you ever had nothing left to lose? Have you ever been in that place where everything else falls away and you want one thing with all your heart, and you have no idea what it is but it's all that matters, just a pure guttural cry from the depths of the soul. Help me. Change me.

God moves powerfully in people's lives when they come to that place. I have known it several times, but never as dramatically as for the jailer. We can know it even now. As we come to share the broken body and poured out blood of our saviour Jesus Christ we can ask it again – What must I do to be saved?

The answer that Paul and Silas give to him and his whole family is this: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

So this is the 3rd Act of the Apostles: a simple, strong, heartfelt message of truth about Jesus. We're not very good at speaking about our faith. I'm not. I can stand up here and preach my heart out but I'm shy about using the name of Jesus out there in the real world. I take inspiration from these heroes of our faith. I'd like to be more bold in speaking my faith in everyday conversation.

Paul and Silas and the jailer's family talk and talk, and along the way they are baptised in the name of Jesus, and Paul and Silas are themselves washed by the family, their wounds carefully tended, clothes found for them.

And then, the final Act of the Apostles in this our story this morning, they ate and drank together. Too early for breakfast, too late for a midnight feast, there in the middle of the night, people who had been strangers and enemies shared a meal. That meal in the shaken jailer's house was a salvation meal, a redemption meal. It was a communion, in the presence of the risen Christ. Wounded people gathered around table together, breaking bread, finding strength and a new beginning.

When Paul had the vision of a man in the night calling to him to come to Macedonia from across the Mediterranean sea, he had no clue that it would take him there, to the worst of circumstances, finding the power of the gospel with the last person he could have expected. Paul and Silas learned to be strong and steady under stress, and so were powerfully used by God for salvation and transformation.

So what are the Acts of the Apostles that we celebrate today?

First, prayer and song in the place of pain, made possible through laying down habits of prayer and song in our every-day.

Second, calling out in care to a person in need: habits of compassion, reaching out, to anyone and everyone, without barriers or prejudice

Third, speaking words of faith; being able to put into words what you know to be true about Jesus, strong simple communication

and Fourth, a meal, sharing together with others in hospitality and in communion.

Our communion here this morning shares in that meal of courage and salvation that Paul and Silas ate with the Chief Guard in the Philippi prison and his family that night. As we eat and drink together we receive the life of Jesus Christ, we grow in strength, we become more steady under stress, more able to love, more grounded in peace.

We continue the Acts of the Apostles, even here in Cashmere.