

Chain reaction (Acts 16.16-34)*Easter 7*

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I only ever taught Sunday School for a short while, it was many years ago and I don't actually remember a lesson on this story, but as I was reading it through the week, I imagined it must have been part of the Sunday School curriculum. I mean, it's so compelling! All that action and drama, it's the kind of stuff kids love, and a neat lesson I imagine about standing against the crowd, standing up for the truth, and being vindicated in the end. Yes, I imagine it was right up there with the stories of David and Goliath, Daniel in the lion's den, and Elijah on Mt Carmel. From a faith perspective, things turn out. Despite opposition and hardship God's servants are protected and God's mission is progressed. It's heartening in this sense, but I must say, reading it again, I'm wary of being too glib or triumphalist about all this. Indeed, the more I sat with the passage, the more questions and dilemmas it raised for me. How are we to read a passage like this?

By way of background, Paul, Silas and Timothy are in the midst of a mission trip - Paul's second as recorded in Acts. In response to guidance from the Holy Spirit the little mission team had arrived in the region of Macedonia and the famous city of Philippi. Early signs about the city's receptivity to the message of Jesus are positive and just before the section we heard is the story of the conversion of Lydia, a local woman who offers hospitality to the missionaries to continue their work. Their approach is daily to go to one of the city's places of prayer and there to share the gospel with anyone willing to engage.

As our reading picked up the story, they were on their way to a place of prayer when they encountered a local woman (a slave) with ‘a spirit of divination’ or soothsaying. Literally in Greek, she had ‘a python spirit’, and one wonders about that term and its meaning? Pythons kill their prey by constricting them and this may account for some of the underlying dynamics in the story. Interestingly, the woman seems intent to follow the missionaries and to cry out, presumably fairly constantly: *‘these men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation’* (17). Now, *what* is being proclaimed here is true (this is who they are and what they’re doing), at that level it could have been helpful, but *how* she does it (over and over, day after day) seems to be increasingly unhelpful and ‘frustrating’. After ‘many days’ of this we’re told: *Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her’* (18).

Now, this is where it the story started to get complicated for me. I can see that this woman was in bondage --- a slave to a cartel of human masters and a python spirit, she has limited power and surely no life of her own. In this regard, Paul’s action of casting out the spirit is liberating. Having said that, I do wonder about her future and what Paul’s action meant for her. Once that potential to make money for her ‘owners’ was removed, how was she treated? I fear it would not have been well, and I wonder if this was of concern for Paul. I’m also mindful that he’d been aware of this slave woman for some days. If he had authority to liberate her from this spirit, why only when he was ‘very much annoyed’? This textual detail causes me to ask what was going on here? Did he just get fed up and react from exasperation or was it a more deliberate response? Did he, for example, interpret the crying out as an insidious attempt to restrict and constrict the proclamation

of the gospel --- to distract and obstruct? And, if it was, I'm still thinking about that woman's future and what Paul thought about it. And indeed, what Luke was thinking when he included the note about Paul's annoyance?

In terms of the overall purpose of this second volume of Luke's writing, this incident does demonstrate that Paul, apostle to the Gentiles and latecomer to apostolic ranks, was as anointed with divine authority and power as Peter, or any of the others. Like his Lord before him, Paul could stand against and cast out evil spirits. In terms of justifying the Gentile mission to an early, resistant Jewish audience, this was clearly important. Even so, the incident raises questions, certainly for this modern reader.

And friends, it can feel a bit uncomfortable, asking these kinds of questions of scriptural texts - it's not what tended to happen at Sunday School. But it seems to me that in grappling with honestly with the niggles in the text, we're pushed to a deeper reading and engagement. In this case, part of what emerges is that proclaiming the story of Jesus in the context of unjust systems is going to be a disruptive thing - complex and at times messy precisely because it always has implications. It doesn't happen in a hermetically sealed corner of our lives - it affects everything and working these through takes time and means changes, maybe even in the first instance what feel like losses. In the rest of this text, we read of the consequences for Paul and Silas, these are hard, but let's not forget that slave-woman, who though freed of a constricting spirit, also became a lot less valuable to her 'owners'! What happened for her?

We might hope that people who witness a demonstration of divine authority and release like this would react with wonder and faith (as the jailer does later) but here the reaction is negative and hostile. When these men see that their hope of making money from their slave's soothsaying has

dried up, they seize Paul and Silas, drag them into the marketplace, and accuse them before the authorities: *'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe,'* they complain, sounding so innocent and clean. The surrounding crowd is drawn into the drama and very quickly a base desire for sport and blood takes hold. What is that about crowds? With no one to plead for justice or a fair trial, Paul and Silas are humiliated by being stripped, beaten with rods, and thrown into the deepest, darkest cell in the local prison. Wow, the cost of discipleship! Let's not forget that, and what some of our brothers and sisters are suffering in parts of the world today. And it appears, as so often still, that self-interested political power and brute force holds the day.

Well, that's how it looks, but, as Luke goes on to convey, it's not the end. The first sign that the powers of this world are not fully in charge comes with how composed Paul and Silas are in their prison dungeon. Far from being intimidated, these men are calmly praying and singing - filling (subverting?) the darkness and stench with music and trust. The other prisoners were listening and

Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

Now, I've got to say, from a literal perspective this story does seem a rather far-fetched. An earth-quake just at that time... we'll maybe... forcing open all the cell doors... well maybe... breaking all the stocks... hmmm... no prisoner escaping... hmmm... the jailer in the process of killing himself before confirming what's actually happened... hmmm!!

Well, those who know the book of Acts will be aware that God has already sprung preachers from Roman prisons on two previous occasions (5:17-21, 12:6-11). In this regard, we shouldn't be surprised that the Philippian jail cannot hold Paul and Silas. But the earthquake in this text is certainly different in that it releases rather than trapping and crushing as powerful quakes usually do. As a *literal* story it beggars belief; but as a *literary* device it conveys significant meaning. There's little doubt here that Luke is wanting the reader to interpret this quake as 'a portent of divine will' (Squires 2003: 1247) and this, I suggest, connects with his bigger purpose, which is to affirm the legitimacy of the mission to the Gentiles, and with it, I imagine, to encourage those who were wondering about the point of going to proclaim the good news in the face of such hostility, rejection and suffering. Far from being misguided or doomed, Luke is reassuring original readers (and us) that God is with them as they engage in his mission, sovereignly guiding, providing, and, at times, rescuing. And yes, though things can get really tough, it's not the whole story, nor the end.

In this case, the Philippian jailer perceives something divine at work in this quake and its surprising outcome and this leads to an opportunity for Paul to testify to Christ. The jailer received the message gladly, he and his household were baptised that night, there is much rejoicing and in gratitude the jailer washes Paul and Silas's wounds and sets food before them. In Acts, such actions are always a sign of a person's conversion --- hospitality and rejoicing.

It is a strange text - difficult for modern ears. But what I'm left with is a sense of the disruptive impact of the gospel, which upsets the status quo, the ground on which business as usual is founded --- an earthquake effect. It doesn't leave things the same --- for the slave woman, for her owners, for

the jailer, for Paul and Silas. I'm left with a sense of the 'chain' reaction that freedom unleashes - how our bondages and freedoms are interconnected, and how a shift in one of us or in an aspect of our lives affects the whole. My freedom impacts on you and on possibilities you perceive in life; my bondage constricts and diminishes you --- and the point of the 'good news' is that one by one everyone's chains be 'unfastened'. And finally, I'm left with that unlikely image of the midnight feast --- a jailer and his sleepy family awakened to new and unexpected life, a prison turned party, the banquet of the kingdom... and all of us invited.

Reference

Squires, John T (2003) 'Acts', in JDG Dunn & JW Rogerson (Eds) *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.