



## Easter 7 2016 St Oswald Port Kells

### Acts 16:16-34

With Paul and Silas, we came to Philippi in Macedonia, a Roman colony, and, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "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." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 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. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

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Have you ever watched one of those films in which one or two people find some way to travel back or forward in time? After the initial shock or wonder that time travel is possible at all, the story typically involves the time travelers getting into one astonishing situation after another in which they are out of step with those around them, out of step because, of course, they don't fit into the culture, the language, or even the clothes of the time that they inhabit.

This is the sense I get as I hear our story from the Book of Acts this morning. It's the story of Paul and his companions on their way to a place of prayer. And on their way, one astonishing thing after another occurs, not because they're time travelers but because they are, in a sense, "culture travelers"—people who operate out of an entirely different set of norms and values than those around them. Their culture, of course, the culture that the author of Acts wants us to see, is a *Christian* counter-culture, one that shows us alternative ways of seeing and responding to our own world.

And so what are these alternative ways of seeing and responding to the world that Paul and his companions show us?

First, in a world that accepts slavery, they choose liberation.

Second, in a situation of suffering, they sing.

And third, in a situation in which they could have a bit of revenge, they choose compassion.

And so first: In a world that accepts slavery, they choose liberation.

Our story opens with Paul and his companions on their way to a place of prayer when they meet a slave girl. She is what you might call a "service provider," someone whose owners have figured out that they could market her as a fortune teller based on her unusual behavior—behavior, we are told, that comes from some form of demon possession.

But there's a hitch—this same fortune-teller slave girl decides to pursue Paul and the others crying out after them as they attempt to do their work. And so whether out of being disturbed at what she is saying or on account of his increasing awareness of the debilitating effect of this demon, Paul decides to heal the girl by casting out her demon in the name of Jesus. In doing this, he renders her incapable of fortune-telling and incapable of making any more fortune for her owners.

And so we learn that Christian counter-culture chooses the liberation of people over the enslavement of one person to another, particularly when the motive has to do with a profit motive. Within this, then, Christian counter-culture denounces a merely utilitarian understanding of the value of people and instead embraces the dignity of every human being.

Which brings us to the second theme about Christian counter-culture shown in this story: In a situation of suffering, we do suffer, but we also find a reason to sing.

Once Paul has rendered the slave girl worthless to her owners, he and the others are dragged before the authorities, stripped of their clothes, beaten with rods and cast into the innermost cell of the jail. Once there, they are fastened into stocks.

And what do these two do after the stripping, after the beating and while they are immobilized in stocks? They sing.

And so as we see in our story, the Christian counter-culture takes suffering seriously—both the experience of suffering and the call to relieve human suffering. At the same time, however, within the experience of suffering, the Christian counter-culture dares to sing, dares to sing the praises of the Lord of Life in the darkest of hours, because suffering will not and cannot have the last word.

Which brings us to the third and final theme of the Christian counter-culture. When given the opportunity to have a bit of revenge on those who have made them suffer by simply leaving their jailor to his own predicament, Paul and his companions act with compassion.

As Paul and Silas are singing in their stocks, an earthquake occurs that frees them and everyone else. Upon seeing this, the jailer who will be held responsible for their escape, tries to kill himself. Instead of fleeing and letting whatever befall their jailer, Paul and Silas stay and care for him, an action that ultimately leads to him and his entire household to being baptized. In other words, in an inhumane situation, they manage to hold onto a humanity that still notices and responds to the suffering of another.

Well, you may say, nice fantasy story, Bishop. You're right—it's a story about a group of Christians who find themselves in a culture that is not their own and in which they're depicted as acting in astonishing and preposterous ways. And that's the problem with it—it paints a picture of a Christian counter-culture that is completely unrealistic not only then but now—a time when it's still difficult to be agents of liberation, a time when suffering is not always followed by singing and a time when compassion can be hard to muster when we ourselves have been hurt.

And this, of course, is a very important for us to be wrestling with today here in this parish. For today we will be confirming nine people, nine people who, with us, will be renewing their baptismal covenant, the most important statement of our membership in the Christian counter culture. And we will be asking for God's blessing on them and on all of us as we continue to try to live out our astonishing and preposterous vocations as Christians in the world. Is it unrealistic of us to think that we can?

Desmond Tutu doesn't think so. He believes that it is possible to live into our baptismal identity fueled by what he calls "the dream of God"—God's longed-for vision of the world, a vision that, if we keep it in our hearts, can assist us in being a part of the Christian counter-culture.

This is some of what he says about this dream:

"God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion. In God's family, there are no outsiders, no enemies. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Muslim and

Christian, Hindu and Buddhist—all belong. When we start to live as brothers and sisters and to recognize our interdependence, we become fully human.

God's love is too great to be confined to any one side of a conflict or to any one religion. People are shocked when I say that George Bush and Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Ladan are brothers, that Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon are brothers, but God says, "All are my children." It is shocking. It is radical. But it is true.

We in South Africa...had the most devastating revelations of ghastly atrocities. We could describe them as monstrous, even demonic. But even these torturers remained children of God, with a possibility of being able to change.

So many of us feel despair because of all the suffering in our world and in our lives. (But) God has not finished with God's work. Creation is a work in progress. Evil is not going to have the last word. God has us as God's collaborators, fellow-workers. And ultimately good—and those who strive for it—will prevail."

And finally Tutu says: "God works through us and through history to bring about God's dream. God actually *needs* us. We are God's partners. When there is someone who is hungry, God wants to perform the miracle of feeding that person, but it won't any longer be through manna falling from heaven. Normally, God can do nothing until we provide God with the means, the bread and the fish, to feed the hungry... God uses each of us to realize God's dream."

This Sunday, the last Sunday of the Easter season, as we confirm people here and as we stand on the brink of the season of Pentecost, the season of the Church in the world, I pray that we together will catch a glimpse of and embrace the dream of God. For acting out of the Christian counter-culture is not the stuff of fantasy. It is about seeing ourselves as active and essential in God's own realization of the dream of a holy people and a redeemed earth.