

The Philippian Gaoler - Colin's sermon from Sunday 2 June 2019
(Reading: Acts 16)

I thought it was going to be another ordinary day in my city of Philippi. As a gaoler in a Roman town I rarely had to deal with any prisoners other than thieves and drunkards, so my job was quite a cushy one. I was in charge and was left to get on with it.

It appears that some Jews had recently come to the city speaking about someone called Christus. Everything took off rather explosively when one of them named Paul apparently made an evil spirit come out of a slave girl who had been used to tell fortunes for her masters.

Those men were extremely annoyed and upset that they had lost their means of making money – and who wouldn't be! Their anger led them to grab the Jews and take them before the magistrates – supported by a large crowd. Roman justice is the best there is and the magistrates did not hesitate to put down activities that were against the Roman law.

They ordered two of them, named Paul and Silas, to be stripped and flogged and then put into my custody.

I knew what to do. Our rules are clear – dangerous prisoners get locked up deep in the centre of the prison. I made doubly sure that they could not escape by putting them in the stocks as well. I wasn't going to have any trouble on my watch.

But curiously, despite the floggings and being in the stocks, before too long these two, Paul and Silas, were speaking out loud to their god and singing praises.

How could anyone in their circumstances find anything to sing about?

I left them to get on with it and went off to sleep in my small room at the front of the gaol. It seemed that I had only just dropped off when I was thrown to the floor by an earthquake.

The whole building shook and rocked – and it scared me rigid. I had experienced much as a soldier in the legion, but nothing prepared me for this.

I was terrified – both by the earthquake and by the thought that all the prisoners would have escaped from the damaged gaol.

As it happened on my watch, it was my responsibility and the punishment would have been such that I preferred to take my own life.

I was just about to run myself through with my sword when the man Paul shouted out – “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here”.

I was gob smacked – and, getting my men to get lights, I rushed into the inner prison trembling with fear. What was going on here?

Paul and Silas were like no other men I had ever met. Despite severe flogging and imprisonment, they could still sing praises to their god and pray to him. And then they didn’t even try to escape when the opportunity arose.

What sort of men were these? What sort of god did they follow? I was so challenged by all of this that I blurted out – “What must I do to be saved?” Their reply was so straight forward – “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household”.

While I treated their injuries they told me all about Jesus, who they said was the son of Almighty God, Jehovah, who had died on a Roman cross but then rose from the dead, so that all who believe in him could inherit eternal life. No wonder they sang praises the way they did!

The upshot was that that very night I was baptised as a believer along with my household.

What a day! What a result!

That could have been the diary of that Philippian gaoler as he looked back on what happened to him.

But this is not the whole story. It was part of the beginning of the church at Philippi.

Whilst a Jewish male would start each day with a prayer thanking God that he was not born a Gentile, a woman or a slave, the Church at Philippi was formed from just these three!

Lydia, a seller of purple cloth and therefore a wealthy woman, was the first convert.

The second convert was the slave girl whom Paul released from possession by an evil spirit. The loss of her predictive powers meant financial loss to her owners and imprisonment for Paul and Silas.

The third convert was the Roman gaoler charged with custody of Paul and Silas.

Paul's vision, recorded at the beginning of Acts 16, was of a man begging for help. What was the reality? Three people had their lives transformed. Lydia, a seeker after God, found him in Jesus. The slave girl found release from her controlling evil spirit in the name of Jesus. The Roman gaoler found peace in the name of Jesus.

Having brought together this small group of believers, Paul then had to leave the city. Was this to be the end of the burgeoning church in Philippi? It hardly seemed a promising start!

But if we look on in the New Testament to Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, written some 10 or 12 years later, we can see what became of that small beginning. Paul wrote as follows:

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus".

The Church begun in Philippi with those few members grew to spiritual maturity. But Paul wanted more for them – "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight...[and that you] ... would be filled with the fruit of righteousness".

Small beginnings can have great effects. From little acorns mighty oaks grow. A pebble in a pond produces spreading ripples.

I think that there are several parallels between life in Philippi then and life in our country today.

Where was the gaoler to look for his needs to be met? Philippi was a multi-cultural city. Founded by Romans; settled in by many different peoples because of the trade route passing through it; a city with worship of many different gods, both Roman and others. Despite being a Roman, the gaoler recognised in Paul and Silas something that none of the other religions offered. He could see that there was nothing and no-one to compare to the One who fills His people with His Spirit. In our own multi-cultural world, is that distinctiveness of being a Christian still obvious?

Secondly, there is the same problem today as back then, summed up in the gaoler's words "What must I do to be saved?". Literally this phrase means "how do I get out of this mess?". All of us have probably been in that situation. Other gods are man's invention but we have a God who loves us dearly and who came into our world in His only Son. That love was shown to us on the cross and, as Peter said after Pentecost, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved". As you see, no equivocation there!

This is the same message given to the gaoler "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved..." and it is the same message and truth that is before each one of us.

God enables us to see beyond our present circumstances, to find comfort in His presence and hope for the future. This was the message of Paul to the gaoler and his household which led to their own professions of faith.

The gaoler found inner peace and salvation on that day. He was beside himself and about to commit suicide when Jesus came into his life. Jesus gave him peace and joy.

Jesus gave His disciples peace and He gives the same peace to each one of us today. Jesus does not necessarily remove any problem we may face, but He does promise to be with us, with His peace, whatever happens to us. All we have to do is to follow the Philippian gaoler and ask Jesus to make himself real to us.