**21st June 2015**

**Focus Scripture: Acts 16:16–34**

On Wednesday evening Dylann Roof had attended a Bible study group at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina for nearly an hour at the church before becoming aggressive and violent, He then started shooting people. Eight people died at the scene and one person died later in hospital. There were three survivors.

Charleston experienced evil in a primary form. Roof wanted to start a race war.

What is remarkable is the witness by the relatives as they were allowed to speak to Roof at his appearance in court. Before the world’s media they each came forward with words not of hate and revenge but of forgiveness and mercy.

Nadine Collier, daughter of Ethel Lance who was shot dead, spoke on behalf of her mother in court. She also offered some remarks outside of the court, where she said she was a "Christian woman" and her faith would bring her through the tragedy.

"She's in a better place now, and we're all trying to get there," she said before the hearing. "God knows the Lance family is going to be okay."

Speaking to Dylann Roof in court, she said: "I just want everybody to know, to you, I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again but I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul. You hurt me, you hurt a lot of people, but God forgive you, and I forgive you.

Anthony Thompson is the husband of Myra Thompson and a reverend of the Anglican Church of North America. He spoke on behalf of his wife in court.

To Mr Roof, he said: "I forgive you and my family forgives you but we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent, confess, give your life to the one who matters the most, Christ, so he can change it, and change your ways no matter what happened to you and you'll be okay through that. And better off than how you are right now."

Rev Simmons' granddaughter Alana spoke on behalf of their family. She was very composed and calm, stressing that hate would not win the day.

Ms Simmons addressed Mr Roof in court: "Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof, everyone's plea for your soul is proof that they lived and loved and their legacies will live in love. So hate won't win and I just want to thank the courts for making sure that hate doesn't win."

Others also spoke in the same way. These are remarkable words – words which you may have not heard on our media because they are shocking and too full of God and Christ for our secular press.

Charleston is often called the Holy City for the number of churches it is home to, and the role religion plays here. For some, like Chris and Camryn, unwavering faith is the only way to turn such a devastating loss into something positive. The scriptures tell us to overcome evil with love in the name of Christ.

Sometimes dark forces take over communities and individuals. Hatred spills out. Let us pray for the Spirit of Christ to be at work in Charleston and indeed the USA. They are of course still a very religious, indeed Christian nation.

Today is the summer solstice. Pagans, druids, witches all venerate this as a special day to connect with nature and the spiritual world. Despite our secular, materialistic and scientific outlook as a society interest in the supernatural and the paranormal is huge. There is almost an innate longing in all of us for something more than what we can see and touch. Most Christians believe in that more – they believe in God, so arguably are open to the supernatural, the paranormal. But he supernatural has its dark side.

I don’t particularly like horror films. As a teenager I enjoyed the dare of watching them. Christopher Lee, who has just died, was of course famous for his role as Dracula. Those Hammer Horror films were very gothic but also remarkably religious. Dracula was always repelled by the sight of a cross. Hence that old joke: Dracula would never make a goalkeeper because he couldn’t cope with crosses.

I confess I saw the film the Exorcist in my late teens. Voted the scariest film ever, it is based on a real life story of the possession of a girl in Washington in the 1950s and I actually found the film not only scary but also affirming my belief in the existence of God and the need for Christ in my life.

I read an article by Peter Laws who wrote about his experience of watching the Exorcist and found it chimed with mine. *‘Its presentation of uncensored evil gave my spiritual wonderings an unexpected urgency: might I be wise to connect with the good sooner rather than later.’*

*The film is basically about how two priests deliver a girl from demonic possession. It was unique, in that the film said it was only the church that had the real answer to true primary evil. The priests in the film weren’t the corrupt perverts or figures of fun so common to other cultural portrayals of men of the cloth. In the film they were intelligent, brave and sacrificially heroic. Today in a world were the supernatural and the church are viewed with suspicion – horror films say something countercultural. That God might be real and that the church might even be filed under ‘solution’, not ‘problem’*.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this story from the Acts of the Apostles, there is a powerful spirit who possesses a girl. She is also controlled by those who “own” and profit from her. But the story tells of the power of God’s Spirit and the power in the name of Jesus to save.

Paul and his party had walked into territory where all kinds of forces, all sorts of power, were at work, and three of them in particular come rushing together in this story. If you remember last week we looked at how the Holy Spirit had been at work in Lydia’s life opening her heart to the message of the good news of Jesus Christ. Now it seems as though strange spiritual forces had been stirred up in this place by this new gospel work. When the Spirit of Christ is at work there is often a reaction.

The ancient world knew all about ‘divination’ as people regularly went to places like Delphi to ask the priestess of Apollo for advice on everything from getting married to making war. Sometimes it seems that the system was merely a matter of cynical folk making profit out of simple gullible souls. But sometimes, as here, it turns more sinister.

This is a grave warning to us – in this age when alternative therapies, new age spiritualties, occult practices, fortune telling, tarot cards, Ouija boards and such like are commonplace and accepted and even fashionable. The Bible and Christian experience warns of harmful spiritual influences in our lives and the need to test the spirits whether these are from God – whether they acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

In this story a woman actually possesses some kind of prophetic spirit. And her minders were making a tidy profit from it. But like a compass needle swinging suddenly round to point to a new and powerful magnetic force, the unfortunate young woman found herself following Paul and Silas and yelling after them. ‘These are servants of the most High God and are declaring a way of salvation’ she yells.

Now to people in Greece at that time ‘the most High God’ would have meant Zeus or whoever people thought was top god in the pantheon. And salvation wouldn’t mean what it meant to a Jew or a Christian, entry into the world of God’s new creation, overcoming corruption, sin and death. It would mean health and prosperity or rescue of some kind of disaster. This was the kind of publicity that Paul could’ve done without.

Although some may say that Paul acted out of compassion for the girl, the text plainly says that Paul was "very much annoyed," so it seems fair to say that this exorcism is almost impulsive. Paul is tired of being heckled by the spirit that possesses her and can recognize who he is, who his God is, and what he has to offer.

Paul turns around and calling not on some nebulous ‘most high god’ but on the name of Jesus, (which is why you should always make your prayers in the name of Jesus) he commands the spirit of prophecy to leave her and it did.

What about this young girl's life afterward? Isn't she still a slave, and isn't Paul moved to help her beyond freeing her from the spirit that possessed her? Are we asking too much of Paul, a man of his time and culture? But Paul is "implicitly" challenging "the economic system of the day,"

Slavery is still with us of course. Think of those caught up in sex trafficking, to its softer forms of those caught in debt or migrant labour gangs. How free are we from forces and attitudes of heart and mind that are not worthy of the name of Christ.

So the second malevolent force comes into play: the profit motive. The girl’s minders were suddenly out of business. Not for the first time, when the gospel suddenly impacts someone’s trade, they turn nasty. After Paul had healed her, the one thing the girl’s owners felt was not joy at her restoration but fury that their source of revenue had gone. Whenever Christianity attacks vested interest or certain lifestyles, trouble follows.

The owners of the slave girl invoke the third malevolent force: religious and political prejudice. They drag Paul and his party before the magistrates and say they are Jews advocating customs we Romans ought not to adopt. These people are not like us – they are anti our customs. They get Paul and Silas flogged and jailed. Paul and Silas discover what happens to those who challenge the powers in control of this world with the power of the name of Jesus. There is no superhero dimension to this. Paul and Silas do not breeze through this untouched. Jesus got himself crucified when he challenged the powers of this world. It is a sobering point. The gospel costs.

In prison Paul and Silas are at prayer and sing praise to God. How amazing! Jesus never gave us permission to moan and criticise and pull down others and get angry and call others fools. His way was one of always loving, forgiving and seeking the best in others – knowing that each person was of great worth and value to God. Of course Jesus got frustrated and angry, particularly at injustice and at self-righteousness – but his anger had love at its root not hatred.

Paul would later write in his letter to the Philippians ‘Be thankful in all circumstances’. Can we praise God for all things – having the faith that God will be at work in all circumstances to bring good?

Tom Fox, was a 54 year old peace activist and a Quaker, and was kidnapped in Iraq in November 2005 along with three other members of Christian Peacemaker Teams – Norman Kember being one of them. Fox was eventually separated from the others; his dead body was discovered in Baghdad a few months later. The other hostages were rescue.

One of his fellow captives wrote about Tom:

*During those first days of relentless, terrifying, excruciating uncertainty, Tom Fox drove into prayer the way a warrior might charge into battle. He turned his captivity into a sustained, unbroken meditation.*

*The chain that bound his wrist became a kind of rosary. He would picture someone: a member of his family, a member of the Iraq team or one of the captors – whoever he felt needed a prayer. Holding a link of the chain, he would breathe in and out, slowly, praying for the person he was holding in his mind. With the completion of each breath, he would pass a chain link through his thumb and index finger.*

*Tom would lead our, Bible-less Bible study. The format was simple. The leader would recall as best he could a Bible passage, and we would reflect together on it according to a series of four questions: What is the main point of this passage to me? Is it true in my experience? What is difficult, challenging or confusing about the passage? How might this passage change my life?*

*Tom’s prayers were profound. They brought our suffering into dialogue with the vast suffering of the world. Again and again his prayers brought to mind other prisoners – security detainees in Iraq, illegal combatants in Guantanamo, the lost and forgotten souls in American penitentiaries. And every time we*

*heard a bomb explode, near or far, Tom would stop to*

*pray for those whose lives had just been destroyed.*

*Every time, without fail.*

*Why are we here? It’s the ultimate question, really. Tom reflected on that question in something he wrote titled “Why Are We Here?” on November 25, 2005, the evening before we were kidnapped. “We are here to root out all aspects of dehumanization that exist within us. We are here to stand with*

*those being dehumanized by oppressors and stand firm against that dehumanization. We are here to stop people, including ourselves, from dehumanizing any of God’s children, no matter how much they dehumanize their own souls.”*

*Every time I read these words, shivers ride up and down my arms. Amplified by their uncanny timing, these words were his last will and testament. His testament, what the arc of his life pointed to, the why of his “why are we here,” was what he called the Peaceable Realm of God, where the lion lies down*

*with the lamb, where every division is healed and fear is banished from every heart, and where rich and poor feast together at God’s banquet table. That vision was the light that guided Tom Fox.*’

Paul and Silas keep faith. There is an earthquake and the prison doors fling open and the chains fall off. The jailor is amazed and terrified and realises that with the prisoners escaping he will have to pay for it with his life, so prepares to commit suicide. Paul reassures him that they are all still there. The jailor trembles with fear and cries out ‘what must I do to be saved?’

Salvation in the ancient world didn’t mean ‘going to heaven when you die’. Jesus often talked about someone being saved when he meant ‘healed’. Saved could mean delivered, rescued from whatever problem, be it sickness, financial disaster, personal catastrophe or anything else, might be threatening. The jailor was facing a death sentence for letting prisoners escape. He wasn’t asking these strange visitors for a detailed exposition of justification be grace through faith. His question is more like ‘how can I get out of this mess?’

‘Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ’ is always the answer to the question of how to be rescued, at whatever level and in whatever sense. When you ask the question ‘how can I get out of this mess’ the question is taken and deepened by the response ‘believe in the Lord Jesus’

When we are caught up in sin – the greed, selfishness, the exploitation – believing in the Lord Jesus is challenging those attitudes and behaviours – do they come under the Lordship of Christ.

If you trust in Jesus you will follow his way – forgive – love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, (it’s in here – open your bibles – believe in the Lord Jesus).

Can you find the way of Jesus out of your situation? In our fears and anxieties – do we trust in the Lord Jesus who walks with us and will care for us and protect us?

In our grief – can we believe in the Lord Jesus – the Resurrection and the life – that death is swallowed up in victory and nothing can separate us from the Love of God.

I may be going away for a few months. Maybe you will miss me, may be you won’t. Jesus is going nowhere. He will still be with you. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

I know he will also be with me and I’m hoping my Sabbatical will be a time of refreshing my relationship and trust in him.

Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ is the classic summary of what the Christian message or good news is all about. It isn’t about getting in touch with one’s inner spiritual self. It isn’t about committing yourself to good works or a life of dutiful worship and church attending. It isn’t even about believing in some particular theory of how God deals with our sins or ‘saves us’.

It is about recognizing, acknowledging and hailing Jesus Christ as Lord – confess with your lips, Jesus as Lord, believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead and you will be saved. The phrase ‘Jesus is Lord’ is what, from the earliest times, people said as they came for baptism, as the jailor and his household promptly did.

That request came about because of the earthquake. God’s messengers are not protected from the sufferings that will come when their message challenged the easy smug rule of political, economic or spiritual forces.

But God is not mocked. Vindication will come. Dylann Roof can shoot down the Lord’s people but judgement will come. We would prefer it if we could have the result without the process, the crown without the cross, but that is never the way in the kingdom of God.

Paul will face many more accusations and beatings and ultimately death in confessing that Jesus is Lord.

But here the world is turned upside down and a Roman jailor throws a party for two battered but rejoicing heralds of the Lord Jesus. Those brave Christians in Charleston are turning the world upside down through their forgiveness. We need more earthquakes – personal, individual and societal earthquakes that shake us out of our complacency and our slavery to forces that are not from God.

We may be battered and bruised but let us still rejoice in the hope we have through our Lord Jesus Christ.

If there is one thing I will say to you as we leave for Sabbatical it is this:

‘Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ’.

Reference:

Tom Wright, Acts for Everyone , SPCK

**Questions:**

**1.All of us need to be freed**

There is another way to approach this text that focuses on the ways we humans are captive to forces more powerful than we. The "unspoken question" in this text: "But what about the girl?" In our turn, we each ask, "'But what about me? What is yet to be saved in my perception and behaviour?'

We think that slavery is something from a time long past, at least in most of the world, something from a more unjust culture. But the questions bring home to us the reality of our own captivities and our need for chains that are broken, for liberation, for grace.

**2. Wholehearted acceptance of the gospel**
 "What must I do," he asks, "to be saved from what destroys me? What must I do to be saved from my particular bondage, my oppressive addiction, emptiness, or boredom? There are countless ways to lose our way in this world or to be in bondage, just as there are many different threats from which we need to be saved."

One of the most powerful captivities of our age, besides materialism and militarism, is the way fear can imprison us in our convictions and our desire for security, making us unable to open our hearts and minds to others, to events, to the God who still speaks through them.

How amazed the jailer must be, just as he's about to kill himself, to see that the prisoners are still there! Fear almost leads to death, but compassion leads to his life, and his family's life, being transformed.

"Believing….means becoming decisively aware that our small lives are swept up into a great drama, God's story line. God is indeed reaching out to us in Jesus Christ, taking our lives into the gospel story of transformation and redemption."

Everyone in this story needs to be freed, not only the slave girl but the men who used her (possessed by greed), the men who judged Paul (possessed by fear and a hunger for power or maybe for the public peace), the jailer (owned by the empire), and, most surprisingly of all, Paul and Silas themselves, who need to be freed from their narrow way of thinking. What's the surprise that greets us on our way to ministry, the obstacle that has something important to teach us, or better yet, the opportunity that obstacle may offer for us to do something really wonderful for the sake of the gospel? Whether it's small and personal, for one individual, or big and communal (maybe even global!), like taking down a corrupt system, it is still a call. And we are free to say yes, or to say no and continue on our way.

**3. Rejoicing in God**

There is one more note that is irresistible: how can we read this story and not have our memories come alive with all the talk of washing wounds, being baptized, and sharing a meal? Doesn't that sound familiar to us across all the centuries, and isn't it at the heart of who we are as followers of Jesus? David Tiede sums it up most eloquently: "This story is a remarkable example of the irrepressible hope with which the apostolic movement was sustained in its encounters in the disparate and contentious urban contexts of the Roman order." The adventures continue, throughout the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and today as well, two thousand years later, in the church that claims to follow Jesus, in a world still captive, a world still hungry for good news.

1. P Laws, ‘My dark Pilgrimmage’, Third Way Magazine, June 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)