Reflections 1-7 June 2025 – Freeing captives

**Bible study on Acts 16:16-34**

**Begin with an opening prayer**

Let us walk in the freedom that Christ gives.
Let us use our freedom to praise God our Saviour.
Let us use the freedom Christ gives to serve him
and each other.
Let us use our freedom to love.

**Read the passage**

**Explore and respond to the text**

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

 Acts 16: 16-34

**Paul and Silas in Prison**

**16**Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. **17**She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” **18**She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her.

**19**When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. **20**They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar **21**by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”

**22**The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. **23**After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. **24**When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

**25**About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. **26**Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. **27**The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. **28**But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

**29**The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. **30**He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

**31**They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” **32**Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. **33**At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. **34**The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

**Bible notes**

This is a story about power – its abuse and the way Paul and his team harness God’s power to bring about liberation to voiceless and powerless people.

It opens with an exploited girl hounding the missionaries. What she says is true – Paul and his team are slaves of the ‘Most High God’ and offering a message of salvation. But in her mouth that message is twisted, and people are likely to hear what she says in a way that distorts Paul’s message and prevents them from meeting the Jesus Paul proclaims. So out of annoyance, he acts to silence her, release her from her captivity to a demonic spirit and the control of human masters, and give her the chance to taste the salvation she’s been shouting about and which Lydia has tasted (see verses 14-15).

But her exploiters are outraged. Dragging Paul and Silas before the magistrate, they accuse them of stirring up a disturbance of peace and good order. The crowd joins in – though on what basis Luke doesn’t tell us. Without much of a trial, the magistrates order that Jesus’ followers be stripped, beaten and thrown in prison. It is possible that whatever Paul was teaching, the fact that he was a Jew ignited an antisemitic crowd against them; the fear of difference lurks everywhere.

Paul and Silas are unfazed. At midnight they are singing up a storm, praising God with a ready audience of prisoners. Their storm seems to cause an earthquake, and everyone is freed, but no one leaves. The jailer, fearing he is ruined, draws his sword to kill himself, but Paul stops him and he comes to faith in Jesus and is set free. The gospel, coming to Europe for the first time, is creating a wave that leaves in its wake changed lives and people freed from slavery to the powers that be – whether demonic or Roman. Through the suffering of the missionaries, God’s message has come to those who might not otherwise have heard it (those in prison). The captives have become the liberators to those who held them and fear is replaced by rejoicing with Paul and his team celebrating with the jailer’s whole family round a meal table.

 **Reflection**

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

What would being freed mean to the central characters of the narrative – the slave girl, the jailer, the other prisoners in the cells with Paul, even Paul and his team themselves? Imagine the first conversation any of these characters had with close family and friends after their experience. How would they have described what had happened to them? What kind of freedom had they each obtained through these events? What do we learn about freedom from this passage?

**Questions for reflection**

*You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues arising from this week’s Bible passage.*

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**Questions**

* What makes you feel free?
* There are many ways to feel trapped. What situations are on your heart right now?
* Are there practical ways that you/your church can support prisoners and prison staff in the coming weeks?

**Prayer**

Lord God, thank you for freeing us
from all that enslaves and oppresses us.
We pray for all the burdens and worries
people have shared today.
We bring them to the foot of your cross
and ask for your power and grace
to break these chains.
**Amen**.