

## Sermons at the All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2025

### Bible passage: Acts 16: 16-43

*<sup>16</sup> One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup> While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you<sup>[d]</sup> the way of salvation." <sup>18</sup> 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.*

*<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city <sup>21</sup> and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe." <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup> Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

This is the kind of reading that needs a trigger warning, or a 'contains adult themes' warning! With Luke narrating, we've just encountered a woman who's a survivor of human-trafficking, a woman who's owned and used, not only by humans who've enslaved her, but also by some kind of spirit which tells fortunes. She's not her own woman, and she has no control over her life.

We're in the 10 days of Thy Kingdom Come, where many of us are praying for 5 people to come to know God's love, through the power of his Holy Spirit. In a really dramatic way, our reading from Acts show us what can happen when God's Holy Spirit sets people free in the love of God. We've split the reading into two, and I'm going to speak briefly about Tania's first half now, and will speak for a short while again, after Vanessa has read us the sequel to this story.

But for now, in our story, Paul and Silas are in prison, in the city of Philippi, Macedonia. They've been stripped and flogged, which is illegal treatment for a Roman citizen like Paul, but as we know, when a crowd gets angry, authorities will sometimes bow to the rabble rather than make sure that due process is followed.

Why are Paul and Silas in prison? Through the power of God's Holy Spirit, they've disrupted the powers that be – the human powers which say it's OK to capture and enslave another person, the human powers which say it's OK to use a captive person's abilities for your own profit. And also a strange spiritual power, this 'spirit of divination', an idea which some might scoff at today, but which appears to still have plenty of followers, if the little adverts for mediums and seers in my letter box are anything to go by. I guess it may depend on where you've grown up, if you understand this spirit of divination as a fake talent, or as something people can really possess, or be possessed by.

For Paul and Silas, it was a real talent, because, surprisingly, she knows exactly what they're called to do in her city.

"These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

Interesting that she also sees them as slaves, isn't it? Paul described himself as a willing slave of God on several occasions, so she's not wrong. And she says their purpose there is to 'proclaim the way of salvation'.

We probably think we know what salvation means, sitting here in church, but the people of the imperial Roman province of Macedonia didn't really have much of an idea. At its base, salvation means being saved, being rescued. Paul's Jewish heritage taught him that God has rescued the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. That's what salvation had meant to him, growing up.

But in this story, we've just heard about a woman who's, almost casually, rescued, saved, from having no control over her own mind. Whether she's saved from slavery too, there's no mention, which is infuriating.

And Tania's reading leaves Paul and Silas in need of rescue too. The woman needed to be saved from spiritual, mental and actual captivity, the two men need to be rescued from a physical prison, their legs in chains.

As Vanessa reads the second half of the story to us, let's see what these two men are doing, tied up and imprisoned. And let's listen out for that idea of being saved, salvation, again, as it crops up in the mouth of a new character.

*<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup> They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup> They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. <sup>34</sup> 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.*

Well! If you didn't know that story before, did it develop as you expected?

Before we talk about it, I want to remember the theme of our prayers for the next ten days, between Ascension (Thursday) and Pentecost (next Sunday). We're encouraged to pray in two ways: for God's Holy Spirit to come on us, and for five people we know, to come to know the love of God.

In this second half of Paul and Silas' adventures, we see both happening – God's Holy Spirit uses a violent earthquake to break open the chains and doors of the jail. And God's Holy Spirit causes a man at the end of his tether, a man tested beyond his limits, to throw himself on the mercy of a God he doesn't yet know, and then to discover God's love for himself.

In the first part of the story we encountered a woman enslaved physically and spiritually, and God's people imprisoned on the testimony of some slave owners. In this second part we meet a man who's about to get in trouble with his employers, and who believes his only option is to take his own life. We're back to the trigger warnings – the people Paul meets during this stay in Philippi are in extreme situations, which lead to extreme behaviours.

The jailer is looking for a way to be saved – a way to save his life from the tyranny of his Roman bosses, who will put a jailer to death if he fails in his duties. He sees his own sword as the gentler way out, but when Paul intervenes he grasps at straws and wonders if this power at work in Paul's life is something which could also save him.

I've described the jailer's behaviour, the woman's situation, and the imprisonment and beating of Paul and Silas as extreme. But people who feel trapped, people who are driven to despair, even people who've been tortured and imprisoned, are sadly not so rare. I'm pretty certain some of you will identify with them, and even more of you will be able to think of the people you're praying for, as part of our Thy Kingdom Come, prayers. If anything in this reading or my sermon have triggered memories or concerns in you, please do know you can talk to me, or to the other members of our clergy team and Moira our safeguarding officer.

Think now, of your friends or family members who are on your prayer list. When we pray 'Your kingdom come' in their lives, when we pray 'Your will be done', in their lives, what are we praying for?

We are praying for the Holy Spirit to work in their minds, their hearts, their families, their school, their work, their situations of happiness and their situations of desperation. We're praying that, like the jailer, they'll be moved to open up to God, and bring whatever situations they need saving from, to God. And we're trusting that the Holy Spirit who loves them, the Holy Spirit who works through lives in physical, emotional, mental and spiritual ways, will show them that they are loved, and freed, and included, and saved, in His Kingdom.

Let's bow our heads and pray:

Lord, we bring before you now our five friends, workmates, schoolmates, or family. We trust you with them, in your love. We pray, come, Holy Spirit, your kingdom come, your will be done, in their lives.

Amen