

St Peter's Ealing

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2019

Easter 7 YrC (Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21)

I'm free!!

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One of the more lively discussions I had whilst Rector of Christ Church was on the efficacy and place of horoscopes in the Christian life. I was surprised how many of my number read their horoscopes daily and how many of them actually took them seriously. I was somewhat flummoxed. They were quiet astonished when I pointed out how incompatible such divination was with the Christian faith. That we are called through our baptismal promise to rely upon God and be strengthened by the Holy Spirit whilst guided by the words and example of the Christ. The response I got was, "But Fr David, they work".

This may have been a problem for the disciples who were left after the Ascension, waiting for the promise of Jesus Christ to be fulfilled in that the advocate was being sent to strengthen them for the journey ahead. Would it not be tempting to fall back on the things we have known, or that seem to work? That, after all, is what was being argued to me in this discussion. But then we looked closer and I pointed out how we can read into things what we want to see. That the language used was sufficiently vague to, on closer examination, have no strength or power.

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles is an example of the power of God over all things. Whether you believe in divination or fortune telling or not one thing is made clear in this passage, the power of God to bring healing and freedom to the whole of creation is real. The apostles obviously did believe in the power and words of this slave girl. And here is the first healing. Through the driving out of this spirit the girl is set free; firstly from the enslavement to the daemon who made pronouncements through her; secondly from her owners who no longer had any use for her. Sadly, we don't know what happened to her, she was probably sold on but I live in the hope that she was set free.

If we are uncertain of the freeing power of God then the next stage of the story seeks to make that clear. Imprisoned by the authorities, Paul and Silas are able to express first their freedom from the fear of persecution and death by their demeanour in prison; by leading the prisoners in songs of praise and in prayer. Then it is the power of God, again through nature that frees them from the injustice of imprisonment; their chains fell off and they were free.

And if we are still unclear Paul and Silas, by their actions, declares the freedom of God in first not running off and secondly freeing the prison guard of his fear of the authorities, which drew that same guard to the liberating faith in Jesus.

In the gospel reading today we are offered the classic teaching of Jesus on the nature and relationship of the people of faith to God through him. The call that all should be one as he is one with the father. The question we are left with is how can that be when we are so different? What does this oneness mean, how does it show itself?

One might want to argue that, with all the divisions the church is riddled with this is the one command we are incapable of adhering to. The key is the word love. I discussed this the other day with the boys of Durston House. You stand in front of a hall full of boys and ask them what is love. It is a pretty daunting experience. But it is an important question and unless we grapple with it this whole thing of oneness is really difficult. I suggested, in defining love, we are talking about truth, respect, and justice. We can't always be affectionate towards each other and even like each other but we can be respectful. We can't always be agreeing with one another, concurring with each other or even walking alongside each other but we can be just with one another. We can and must always be truthful with each other. If we can do these three things we can share God's love together in a practical and meaningful way. I believe we can all journey along the way of faith and we can build up the kingdom of God together if we but walk in this way of love.

How do we get to do all this? By recognising the power of God to make us free; free from the confines of the world, free to love, be respectful, truthful and just, free to acknowledge Jesus as our lord and saviour, free from the constraints of the world, full in the knowledge of God's power over all things made real for us in the bread and wine of the eucharist. As we break the bread and share the common cup we proclaim the Lord Jesus in our lives. We claim that freedom for ourselves and we also claim the duty to live in the love of God; to acknowledge our many differences and to live with those differences in unity and in faith. The freeing of the slave girl, the freeing of the apostles, the freeing of the gaoler are all metaphors for our freeing from the ways of this world, from sin and from death; freeing us to live in the Kingdom of God that was and is and is to come. I hope my discussion at Christ Church freed some of our members from the drudgery of horoscopes, palm readers and soothsayers. I pray that you are freed to live the life of the good news of Jesus and is so doing are liberated to share that same love with those around you.