



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 26th October 2008
by Mark Ashton

10p

Acts 16:6-40

The Pain and the Power

What is it really like to be a Christian? What is the Christian life really like . . . in practice?

If you are not yet a Christian believer, you could be excused for being confused. There are so many caricatures around. There is the pious version—all outward religious practices and fierce moral laws: as one man put it—‘an alien, hard-hearted, puritanical, interfering religion that has no feeling for, or sympathy with, the psychological needs of the individual caught up in the frightening complexities of life’ (Dave Gooding). But then there is the wet version—Familiar with that? All about love and peace, and completely ineffective in the work place: ‘while science builds dams, Christianity prays for rain’. Or then there is the deluded version with a beaming triumphalistic smile in the face of disease, disaster and death, claiming a pretend victory over such things, with eyes tight shut to what is really going on.

If I am a believer, am I expected to adopt one of those stances? Perhaps you are convinced of the truth of Jesus, but the Christian life is not quite working out as expected: is it really about power? or about pain? or about pretence?

Well, let’s consider Acts 16, where we first find Paul and his companions

1. Coping with frustration

‘Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸So

they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas (vv 6-8). [Figure 1]

Figure 1



You will remember that Paul had set out from Antioch in Syria, having returned there from the Council in Jerusalem, to re-visit the churches they had founded on the first Missionary Journey. But then they were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching . . . in . . . Asia, the obvious place to go. So they turn north, but the spirit of Jesus would not allow them to enter Bithynia.

We are not told how this happened. But it must have been frustrating. They knew they were to preach the gospel. They did not require any special guidance from God about that. It is the duty of every Christian believer, and we do not need special guidance to do it, any more than I need a letter from the Queen each year telling me to pay my income tax. But where were they to do it? Because everywhere they tried they were forbidden!

Two prohibitions preceded the eventual invitation: *During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us"* (v9). Actually the frustrations they experienced have been shared by many missionaries: David Livingstone set his heart on China but ended up in Africa; William Carey wanted to go to the South Sea Islands (Polynesia), and actually spent his life in India; Judson, the great Baptist missionary to Burma, only got there because the East India Company would not let him work in India. Guidance is negative as well as positive; but whatever the frustrations for Paul and his companions, they drew a positive conclusion from them. *After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them* (v10). Have you and I learnt to draw that positive conclusion from frustrating circumstances in our lives? That God is using them to get us where He wants us to be?

But for Paul what followed was actually quite disappointing:

2. Dealing with disappointment

¹¹*From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis.* ¹²*From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days* (vv 11-12). For Paul this was a short sail across the Aegean from one Roman province to another: for us it is the first record of Christianity coming to Europe. But after all God's guidance to get them there, what they found was quite disappointing:

¹³*On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.* ¹⁴*One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.* ¹⁵*When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us* (vv 13-15). No synagogue in Philippi: That meant there must have been less than ten male Jews there, so Paul could not follow his normal practice of starting by preaching to men in the synagogue. Instead they

find a group of women by a river, and one responded (And she was actually from Thyatira, back in Asia, where Paul had just come from and been forbidden to preach). Perhaps the fact that she was away from home may have helped Lydia to respond to Paul's message. We often find that pattern in the Bible (Ethiopian eunuch—a few chapters earlier). And for many of us, being away from home proves spiritually helpful. God uses it to get us to think more deeply about our lives. Perhaps that is true for some here today? You're far from home . . . and you're thinking rather more than you usually do.

Anyway, even if Paul and Silas had been expecting more than this on their arrival in Macedonia, they just did what they could with what was in front of them, with the opportunities that presented themselves. They just took the next step ahead of them. And God worked: ¹⁴*The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.* ¹⁵*When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us* (vv 14-15). When Christianity opens a heart, it opens a home. It may not have looked like much, but it was Christianity's first foothold in Europe.

And then things began to get more exciting. If the second missionary journey so far had been frustrating and a little disappointing, now events got out of control. Let's call this—

3. Trusting when life is out of control

¹⁶*Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.* ¹⁷*This girl 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 troubled 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* (vv 16-18). There is a real spirit world, and there are spiritual forces opposing Christian faith. If the devil cannot stop the gospel being preached, he will make it look ridiculous in some way or other. This poor manic girl was shouting out the truth—*This girl 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” (v17), but it was not going to help anyone understand and believe their message. Rather the reverse. The Devil was blurring the Christian message by having it proclaimed by a spiritist. Everything that gets added to the gospel which makes it harder to accept is ultimately the work of the devil. Superstition, institutionalisation, ceremonialism, even every little bit of my own culture or temperament that I add to Jesus is an obstacle for others coming to know Him.

And Paul would not allow the devil to go on muddying the water in this way. There had to be a clear distinction between Jesus and the demonic spirit possessing this girl: ***She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled 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*** (v18).

‘Jesus the name high over all, in Hell or earth or sky. Angels and men before it fall, and devils fear and fly.’ It was a moment of power evangelism . . . or was it? Notice what follows: We’re not told if the girl started to believe in Jesus; but: ¹⁹***When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. ²⁰They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar ²¹by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice”*** (vv 18-21). It sounds as though a business syndicate had made a joint investment in this girl, and she was a nice little earner for them. And they knew exactly how to manipulate local government (no mention of their own financial loss, notice) and to woo the crowd: ²²***The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. ²³After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks*** (vv22-24).

Do you remember what resulted from the previous healing miracle Luke had recorded in detail? It was the crippled man in Lystra back in chapter 14 and the crowd there tried to sacrifice bulls to Paul and Barnabas thinking them to be Hermes and Zeus—

Hardly effective evangelism! Here the result of another healing miracle was a flogging and imprisonment. But there followed a greater miracle: ***About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them*** (v25).

I have not (yet) spent a night in prison, but I imagine they could be quite noisy affairs. I guess the jailer and the other prisoners in Philippi were used to being kept awake at night by screams and complaints,—but never before by praying and singing. ***About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them*** (v25). How did Paul and Silas do that?

Well, it is just an application of what we have seen from earlier in the passage. They knew God controlled the circumstances of their lives. In all his imprisonments (this was not the only one) . . . you know Paul never called himself ‘a prisoner of Rome’, or ‘a prisoner of the Emperor’ or ‘a prisoner of the government’. You know what he called himself? He called himself ‘a prisoner of Jesus Christ’. They accepted their circumstances (however frustrating) as God’s guidance, and then they did what they could, took the next small step and all they could do in this case was hold a prayer meeting, so they did and sang their favourite choruses to one another to keep their spirits up. It was all they could do. They did what they could do. And God was with them.

Thirty-five years ago I heard the Romanian pastor, Richard Wurmbrandt, speaking in Christ’s College chapel, just across the road behind me. The Communists imprisoned him for 14 years, 3 of them in solitary confinement. And he wrote this: ‘The communists believe that happiness comes from material satisfaction; but alone in my cell, cold, hungry, and in rags, I danced for joy every night. Sometimes I was so filled with You that I thought I would burst if I didn’t give it expression’. Well, Paul and Silas found God with them in prison, and that He was working, even when they couldn’t be.

²⁵***About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody’s***

chains came loose. ²⁷The 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. ²⁸But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" ²⁹The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved" (vv 25-30)? Something had brought this jailer to this point. I think it must have been verse 25. How Christians handle suffering is a most eloquent witness to the world. And God opened another heart, which opened another home: ³¹They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." ³²Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴The 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 family (vv 31-34).

We'll leave it there for this week. But let's note in closing: The Christian life in Acts 16 is about facing frustration and disappointment and circumstances beyond our control, in a way which allows the God, Who is in control of them, to work through us and through them.

That is where the power of God is seen on this earth. It is powerful, but it does not look it. Forgive me for a favourite story I have told before, but it makes this point so well and I heard it from the lips of Richard Wurmbrandt as he spoke in Christ's chapel all those years ago. It moved me then, and it moves me still. He told of a small boy with a bunch of flowers who asked to see the commander of a communist prison camp. He offered flowers and said, "Today is Mother's Day and every year I go to the market to buy a bunch of flowers for my mother. But last year, because she was a Christian, she was imprisoned here in your camp, and died. So this year I have no one to give my flowers to. So I have brought them here for you—to give to your wife."

Do you see why Christianity is outlasting Communism? And I think it will last Islam too, and every other human belief system. *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them* (v25). If you are a Christian, have you begun to live that way—making your suffering a testimony for Christ? Do our friends see Jesus when we suffer? Frustration, disappointment, suffering come sooner or later in every human life. It is not an issue of whether they come; it is an issue of how we cope with them when they come. Are we different? Is that how our friends recognise us in college? By how we cope with disappointment and pain? And if you are not a Christian, have you come across a better way to live your life? How do you handle suffering?

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)