

Easter 7. Readings and Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension

Acts 16:16-34

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

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

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

John 17:20-end

²⁰ 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^[f] so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

²⁵ 'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

Sermon: Predicament, Power and Purpose

Lord, kindle within us the fire of your love!

Predicament/Persecution

Many of us are aware of a deep weariness at the present time.

Having endured the last 2 years of Covid times many of us have depleted resources, and faced with the financial and economic challenges, the mental health challenges, domestic, European and global political, economic and environmental challenges there is a big sigh. It feels rather big and heavy!

Some of us might feel a little embarrassed (I do) about our own heaviness and weariness when we compare it with the plight of so many people in Ukraine, the rebel dissenters in Russia, the migrants from Africa, the Uyghurs (WEEGERS) in China, the grieving parents in that Texas town... and so on.

Yesterday the BBC was reporting certain local Catholic responses to the shooting in Texas....

"For the Catholics in this predominantly-Latino community, Thursday was meant to be an annual day of celebration marking the Feast of Ascension, when Jesus rose to Heaven to take his seat beside God, His Father. Instead, at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, where the Garcia's spent most Sundays, the congregation bowed their heads to mourn children and teachers who ascended too soon, leaving loved ones wracked with confusion and grief. As he read from the Gospel, a church deacon reminded the congregation that before he departed, Jesus said, "You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy." This year, that verse is proving more difficult to understand."

I think that this article captures a lot of where people are at.

A significant number of our fellow Christians, our worldwide church family, also face very real and present danger and persecution. Like Paul and Silas some of them end up in prison. But all this in itself can make us feel worn and weary.

When we're weary, relationships with others can start to fray. Our own capacity to be compassionate and active in faith is reduced and there can be a tendency for some of us to withdraw into ourselves. Jesus prayed his prayer (John 17) amidst heightened tension and anxiety and the early Christians who were weary and hard pressed would have heard that call to love one another (John 13) and live in unity with one another through Christ (John 17).

We looked a little bit at weariness last Wednesday morning at Contemplative prayer and the Café on the Hill Life Group, in the presence of one of our Ukrainian sisters in Christ. We reflected on the words of the Lord to a weary church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3. God knows our situations. He gives us grace to keep going. He gives them and us reason to 'hold on.'

Of course, not everyone is weary - thank goodness! Not everyone is feeling a heaviness. Some people are in a very good and positive place in their lives.

Others are not so much weary or heavy laden, as anxious or perplexed and concerned about the uncertainties and challenges we live with.

Yet others of us may feel imprisoned. Circumstances may make it seem like you've been put behind bars. Spiritual battles, sin, grief, health problems, relationship concerns, financial worries can all have that effect.

Whatever your predicament, wherever you are at today I want to give you 2 words to take away.

Power: The first word is power... the power of God.

In Acts the power of God opened locked prison doors and broke the chains of the prisoners. The power of God breaks into weariness, heaviness, grief, persecution and any predicament or life event.

Thursday afternoon we had Anne's funeral. The power of God touching those grieving. Roger's testimony over these days of God holding his hand in the desolation of his grief.

Thursday evening I attend Evensong at Bath Abbey and heard how people have been becoming Christians as they have encountered the power of God in silence, in that awe inspiring place, in the music.

Friday I conducted a wedding and the power of God's love enveloping those gathered.

Paul and Silas prayed and praised the Lord, singing hymns in prison... and the prison was unlocked and chains fell away. The jailer and his household came to faith. The power of God in prayer and praise. The power of God in the midst of great predicament.

Day by day, Christians are persecuted and yet find strength to live and love and forgive and share the good news of Jesus, tapping into a source of strength and power within the life of God that defies belief!

Sinners are freed from the prison of guilt and shame. The power of God in forgiveness and reconciliation.

I suppose what I am trying to indicate is that in God there are resources beyond our comprehension that if we dare to open ourselves up to, can transform beyond belief! Let's raise our expectation afresh in these days.

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, and it marks a ten day period where we pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the church and the world. We're praying for power from on high for lives to be touched and transformed by the power of God.

Like the first disciples we wait, we hope, we long for the Spirit to come. Don't we?

As we dare to hope that can be dangerous – many of us may have been burnt before hoping in our predicaments. But where else shall we go? To who else shall we turn? (John 6:68) Jesus has the words of eternal life. Dare we hope and pray, dare we praise in our predicaments and prisons? I say YES as the power of God still waits for us. Come to me all who are weary says Jesus (Matt 11:28)

In preparing for today I was reminded of an Australian preacher I once heard. He talked about those who were spiritual dry... dry as a bone & weary. I've never forgotten him saying, "those of you who are dry. Do you know what? In a forest, when it's dry, really dry, it's the dry stuff that catches fire."

Some of us are bone dry Christians. May the Lord set us alight with the fire of his love. It only takes a spark.

(The second word) Purpose:

It is generally a lot easier to persevere through life's predicaments and problems when we know our life and faith purpose.

At the moment I think there is quite a bit of struggle not only with weariness but also with purpose. There may well be a link for some (a lack of purpose can make us weary). The last 2 years have got people asking, 'What am I supposed to be doing in my life?' 'Where am I going in life and in death?' 'I'm not really sure who I am at the moment or what I'm supposed to be doing & why.'

What is clear about the life of Jesus, is that he knew his purpose, who he was, where he was going and what he was supposed to do. We see that in Paul and other disciples too. A clear sense of vocation and purpose in their life/Christian walk. To preach the gospel. To baptise believers. To testify to the love and power of God. To reach out to those in need. To bring reconciliation and healing. To live for Christ. To do relationship well, as God's people to praise and pray and be united with one another as Jesus had prayed.

Yet, the disciples at times clearly struggled with their purpose. There were disagreements between church leaders, continual problems with relationships amongst believers, people lapsed, people fell away because it was hard to be Christian. People grew VERY weary – hence the letter in Rev 3:7-13. There was a massive temptation to withdraw from the Christian community. There were real struggles with purpose.

Some of us might be struggling with our sense of purpose as an individual or as part of the church... or indeed the church itself may be struggling as a whole. For some, the burning fire of love for God may have gone out.

Mother Teresa once said, *"I am a little pencil in God's hands. He does the thinking. He does the writing. He does everything; but sometimes it is really hard because it is a broken pencil, and he has to sharpen it a little more."*

Some of us have gone blunt or indeed feel broken and therefore seem unable to fulfil God's purposes in our lives. We may have reached Blackadder status: "life is like a broken pencil... pointless."

Jesus, and Paul and Silas chose to focus not on the great predicaments they faced. They focused on the power and purposes of God and it set them free IN their predicaments. It may be time for many of us to do the same in our weariness or whatever predicament we're facing. To look to Christ... to hope, trust, pray and praise... to be sharpened, healed, freed, watered, set on fire, gently held.

God has given you and me, US a purpose. He promises to send his Holy Spirit to guide us, equip us and empower us to declare in word and deed that Jesus Christ is Lord and to live an abundant life, whatever the circumstances. Let us find, focus and know GOD's power and purposes for our lives in this day and age we're living in. Come Holy Spirit.