

God's overflowing grace

Paul and Silas in Philippi

A sermon given on 8th May 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst
by Rev John Castle

Reading: **Acts 16:16-34**
(Lectionary Year C, Sunday after Ascension)

A week of prayer

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have called for members of the Church of England to devote this week leading up to Pentecost to prayer for evangelism. You can see Archbishop Justin speaking about this on the home page of the Church of England website, www.churchofengland.org.uk

Last week we looked at what evangelism means – simply sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with anyone who is interested in learning more.

Evangelism is the calling of the Church, and it is something that each of us can be part of, in a whole variety of ways. The Archbishop's message is all about praying that we, the church, will be empowered to share this good news with those close to us and those we meet. I think it is significant that the Archbishops are not calling for churches up and down the country to start planning strategies for evangelism, or to appoint evangelists or church planters. They are calling for us all to pray, just as the disciples of Jesus did after his Ascension, as they waited patiently for the Holy Spirit to come upon them.

Archbishop Justin explained in the video with these words:

When the church is full of the presence of Christ we overflow and transform society in the most beautiful and wonderful way. That overflowing starts with our prayer lives, individually and together as we pray and meet with Christ in prayer.

This way of looking at our Christian lives helps to show how the three parts of our Church Purpose are interlinked: prayer enables us to come to know God for ourselves; it is vital to our growth as individuals and as a church; and as we are filled with the love and peace and joy of Christ, we are motivated to show his love in the world, including sharing the gospel with others.

Paul and Silas in Philippi

Last week we saw how the apostle Paul, with his companion Silas, undertook what is known as his “second missionary journey”, in which he started by visiting the churches he had founded on his first journey in the interior of Turkey. He then sought to evangelise the provinces of Asia and Bithynia, but in one way or another the Holy Spirit shut those doors, and, following a dream, the missionaries concluded that God had called them to cross over to the province of Macedonia, what we now call northern Greece.

They travel to the city of Philippi, and Paul, following his usual strategy, looks for the Jewish synagogue – but there isn't one, just a gathering of women following a Jewish pattern of worship outside the city gate. Paul and Silas speak to the women about Jesus, they listen and believe. And so the church begins, with a business woman called Lydia being one of the most prominent of the new converts.

That might seem pretty easy. But it cost Paul and Silas considerable hardship before the next converts were won.

Read [Acts 16:16-24](#) (click on this to open in your web browser)

The first unusual thing that happens is that Paul exorcises a spirit of divination from a slave girl. People today pay good money to go and see clairvoyants, and the same was true in the first century. But the slave-girl wasn't getting any of it. She was being used by her owners for their profit. Something about this, exacerbated by the fact that she wouldn't leave Paul and Silas alone, caused Paul to be annoyed to the point of confronting the situation. The spirit was cast out of the girl, resulting in a massive loss of income for her owners. We don't know what happened to the girl after this. No doubt she was sold as a house slave. It may even be that members of the new church bought her freedom (perhaps the businesswoman Lydia was able to do this). But Paul's act resulted in a massive outpouring of anger and vindictiveness on the part of the owners. They target Paul and Silas's religious and ethnic identity as Jews, and quickly stir up the anti-Semitism which was as much of a problem then as it is now. The mob bring the missionaries to the Forum, the public square and market place where the magistrates' court is located.

The magistrates are more interested in satisfying the mob than in seeing justice done, and order Paul and Silas to be stripped, beaten with rods and thrown into jail for a night (although they don't know it will only be for a night). As if being beaten on the bare back and put in jail wasn't enough, their feet are fastened in the stocks – hardly a position that would make for a good night's sleep!

I wonder what you would have talked about sitting in those stocks if you'd been Paul or Silas?

Read [Acts 16:25-34](#) (click on this to open in your web browser)

In his video message, Archbishop Justin asked us to pray that the church might be “so full of the life and joy of Christ that it overflows with the reality of the presence of Jesus”. The presence of Christ transforms people and situations. And that is what happened in the prison in Philippi because Christ was present in the lives of Paul and Silas.

I think if you were sitting in the stocks with a sore and bleeding back you might be tempted to indulge in a bit of self-pity, and probably a bit of anger at the people who had mistreated you. But Paul and Silas spend the night praying and singing hymns, and I'm sure the other prisoners were amazed at how they could do that after what they had been through.

Imagine I am holding a glass of water in my hand, and you jog me. What spills out? Whatever is in the glass – in this case water, but of course it could be wine! In the same way, when life gives us a knock – sickness, a sudden disaster in our private lives or at work - what is in us is what spills out. If we take time day by day to be filled with grace of God, then it is God's grace that will spill out.

If you take time each day to pray and grow closer to Jesus, then that relationship with the Lord will sustain you in the hard times. If we actively give our lives to Christ and ask him to use us for his glory day by day and week by week, then he will answer our prayers and use even our disasters to bring blessing, maybe not to us, but to others. In our reading, the other prisoners listen and are amazed to see how Paul and Silas handle their misfortune. Your example in how you handle stress, disappointment and unjust suffering might make all the difference to another person's willingness to consider the Christian faith.

And then there is the jailer. If the apostles' response to their treatment doesn't already get him thinking, the event of the earthquake and Paul's timely intervention to prevent him falling on his sword bring things to a head. It's as if he is thinking, “If Paul and Silas's God is like this, I need to find out more for myself”. His life is transformed by hearing the good news about Jesus Christ, and this is shown not only by his being baptised, but by the care he gives to the apostles in washing their wounds and giving them a meal.

The old hymn says "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform". Or, as Paul himself later wrote in his letter to the Romans,

In all things God works for the good of those who love him.
(Romans 8:28 NIV)

This is a verse that is worth memorising. You might find it useful in the future.

Conclusion

The message of today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles is that God can do amazing things in people's lives. Through the witness of his followers, you and me, Jesus seeks to bring transformation to individuals, families, communities. He uses our willingness to be known as Christians, our practical expression of care for others, our tentative sharing of our faith and even our sufferings and disasters to work out his gracious will in the world.

If we want to be part of this, if we want our lives, like Paul and Silas, to be overflowing with his grace, his joy, his love, it starts with prayer.

As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians,

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 NRSV)

This isn't a command to feel happy, but to take our eyes off our problems for a moment and focus on God's love and goodness, to thank him for what he has done in our lives, and to bring everything to God in prayer. Paul showed by his own example that when we put this into practice, amazing things happen. Why don't you try it?

And, as Archbishop Justin said in his video, what better prayer to start with than the Lord's Prayer, where we submit our lives to God and pray that his Kingdom may come and his will be done?