

Sermon Archive 248

Sunday 2 June, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Acts 16: 16-34

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



There are some earthquakes in the Bible that have never really made sense to me. There's the earthquake that happens just as Jesus dies. Reported only in Matthew's gospel (not in Mark, Luke or John) which caused the temple curtain to rip, and opened up the graves of dead saints who then walked around the city. With very much the vibe of some Zombie apocalypse, I wonder how Mark, Luke and John missed it.

Then there was the earthquake, again reported only by Matthew, missed by Mark, Luke and John, at the Garden Tomb on Easter morning. I wonder how most narrators missed *that*.

And now, here in Acts, there's another earthquake - this one failing to flatten the prison, but weirdly opening all the doors and unlocking the wrist and ankle shackles. Equally weird is the reaction of the head prison officer. When he finds the doors wide open, and assumes that the prisoners will all have escaped, he goes for his sword to kill himself. Why would you kill yourself, when an earthquake is not your fault? It's not because of anything you've done or failed to do. Nobody could blame you for the escape. It's simply tectonics beyond your control. Ah! It gets me thinking. Could these earthquakes not be earthquakes at all! Could they be, could this particular one be, metaphors, for some dramatic, world-changing, life-altering something else? A scripture writer's swashbuckling way of saying "something beyond small control is changing the day". Let's look at what's going on before the quake.

-ooOoo-

The general shape of this story is from injustice to justice, from oppression to liberation, from anger to joy, from rejection of the Christian story to a whole household asking for baptism into faith. It's a conversion story, - sotry of a transformation.

At the start, we have some slave owners, who are making a commercial gain out of some unusual gift that their slave girl has. It is said that she has a “spirit of divination”. I imagine that only about half of the people in the community believe in that kind of thing. There are always a good number of sceptics. But among the non-sceptics, there are plenty willing to part with money for a bit of guidance in life. (I see for you a tall dark stranger! Today it just might rain - or maybe it won't. Don't walk under that ladder. I see earthquakes coming.) I wonder how many of the paying public wonder about the value of the divination – but still fork out the cash. Certainly, as the slave owners get angry about the end of the spirit of divination, a lot of the public are quick to join them in their anger.

So Paul and Silas have entered a world where people make money out of other people. It's a world where maybe people are being ripped off, but if they are, they're happy to be. It's a world where people get really angry, really quickly. And in the trial that follows, the charge that's put to the magistrates is a false one: they're accused of being Jewish (which is irrelevant) and of advocating various un-Roman customs (nothing to do with the matter of the servant girl). The way the trial is presented makes it look like this world is one in which truth doesn't really matter. It's in **that** world that Paul and Silas are stripped of their clothes (humiliated), beaten with rods (violated), and thrown in prison (while actually innocent). The rich owners of slaves have had their revenge. Shackles are put on. Doors are locked. The lights are turned off, and they're left in the dark.

What do you do in the darkness? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote letters, poems and prayers. Nelson Mandela studied law - until they stopped him, then did exercises in not becoming bitter. Martin Luther King wrote an essay - an open letter to his ecumenical colleagues who long had told him he needed to be patient. Terry Waite, an avid reader deprived of books, spent his captivity remembering favourite books and doing mathematical equations in his head. Paul and Silas **sing**. We're told that they're singing at midnight, and that the other prisoners were listening to them. I wonder what they sang . . .

In their documentary, *Soundtrack for a Revolution*, directors Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman chronicle that part played in the civil rights movement of music - African American music. Congressman John Lewis, who as a youth had been involved in student protests, says *“It was the music that created a sense of solidarity. And when there was some concern about the possibility of violence,*

or someone being beaten, or someone being arrested and thrown in jail, even when we were thrown in jail, some of us sang a song."

Harry Belafonte says *"All of the song was inspirational. All of the songs had one purpose, and that was to reach deep into the moments of our deepest anguish and to say 'we've had worse than this, we can endure'."*

Rev. Harold Middlebrook, also a student protester in his youth says *"Long before the movement, you must remember that for negroes / coloured as we were called then, in slavery songs were our way of communicating. Singing was our way of expressing inner emotions. . . . And I hear a lot of my friends saying that the movement song 'we shall overcome' came out of the labour struggle. But 'we shall overcome' came out of the old black church"*.

And here we have Paul and Silas, having been subjected to beating and unjust imprisonment - they're singing! From their faith, they're singing. We're told that the people around them (certainly the other prisoners, but maybe also some of the prison guards) are listening. And then there's that strange sounding earthquake. Suddenly, while the prison still stands, the shackles fall free and the doors swing open. I wonder whether within this conversion story, this transformation tale, the earth may have been still while hearts and minds have been shaken. A song-singing shake of the soul.

Certainly, if some of his subordinate prison officers had gone rogue, if they, under the discipline of the head officer, had changed their sides and disobeyed their orders, then that might be a matter for which the head keeper could be blamed. "Couldn't you control your staff? Didn't you make things clear? How could you allow mutiny?" Fearing the reaction of the old order to which he's answerable, following an earthquake of freedom, he goes for his sword.

Paul intervenes, of course. So, there'll be no suicide today. In fact, instead there will be the washing of wounds, the opening of the home, the sharing of food, and the baptism of a whole household. As I said, this is a story of transformation - from injustice to justice, from oppression to liberation, from anger to joy, from rejection of the Christian story to faith. It's a conversion story, at the centre of which we're shaken by a quake - a strange quake that sounds more like singing at midnight. And we're left considering how the world might be shaken as people of faith respond in faith, to the

wrong that is done. Paul and Silas are singing.

Last Sunday there was a bike ride across the city, from Deans Avenue to Linwood. I'm not sure where the idea came from. When did riding a bike every shake the world? Well, this string of bicycles wended its way first to the Buddhist Centre in Riccarton. It went from there to the Hare Krishna Centre just down the road from here. Then to the Christchurch synagogue, St Mary's Pro-cathedral, Oxford Terrace Baptist Church, and the transitional cathedral. Interviewed by Stuff, Ian Wells, who co-organised the bike ride, said: *"we thought it would be informal, friendly . . . it doesn't need to be a big demonstration; it doesn't have to be some big action, but something that's fun to do with our whole community - and cycling is an excellent way to do that."* Other co-organiser, Mazharuddan Syed Ahmed, said *"this gives a very good message that we are one"*.

Farid Ahmed said, of bicycles, "Biking is a symbol of three things. One is courage, the second is hard work and the third is freedom". A bike ride that isn't just a bike ride - an earthquake that is really something else. Symbols of converting interactions. Is this something like Paul and Silas singing change into hearts and minds in prison?

Throughout the whole of the post-shooting period, a recurring theme has been the necessity of not letting the "bad", the "worst", set the agenda, or the dynamics of engagement - but of staying firmly anchored, buoyant and directed within the good. Declared vital at each stage has been the necessity of saying "No, amid injustice and wrong, we are committed to the right, the beautiful, the praise-worthy". It's like singing hymns at midnight. I wonder if keeping the faith, rejecting the wrong, believing in the goodness of God, singing our souls at midnight, isn't the earthquake that the world might need to open up the prison.

Prayers for others will flow from this; but for now we keep a moment of quiet.

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