

Sermon Archive 538

Sunday 1 June, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Acts 16: 16-34

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



There are two scenes here, each one featuring an act of liberation, and each featuring a community reaction to the brand new freedom that has been given.

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She was a good little earner for us - an easy form of income. Some people's slaves are worth it for the domestic chores they do, cleaning the oven, vacuuming the carpet, mowing the lawns. Other people's slaves earn their keep by turning on the red light. You know, this is just the dynamic of slavery - the slave doing the bidding of the master. It took us no time really to work out how to deploy this particular one - since she had a special skill that sat uniquely in the market place. She had an intuition, and insight. We marketed it as "divination", though others called it "fortune telling". You'd be amazed what people are willing to pay for that kind of thing. Do you believe in it? Doesn't matter really, so long as the market place does. Like I said, she was a good money earner for us.

I guess we were happy for her to follow the Christians around the city, shouting out as she followed "these people are special, listen to them". Creating a bit of noise in the market place - it never hurts - who's that woman? She tells fortunes - all about drumming up business, raising the profile. It **was** noticed that the Christians were becoming annoyed by her, but what's that to us? Commercial opportunity sometimes requires a shouty advertisement annoying other people. Suzanne Paul has things to say about her spherical beads; the Big Save Furniture woman has no *sotto voce*.

One of the Christians turns around and says to our slave "come out of her". They say she's freed from a demon - but we say she's mute. And a mute fortune teller is commercially useless. "Share us your insights". "Sorry, I've got nothing". Useless!

Well, not completely useless - still potential for cleaning the oven, mowing the lawn. I wonder about the red light. I wonder what she would think - we'll never know, since we won't ask her - you don't ask a slave what she thinks. They say she's been freed. **We** haven't been; we've suffered a loss.

In our anger, we looked for redress. I don't know what you'd call the charge - this complaint about the damage to our income. Is it theft of business capacity, the destruction of a capacity to provide a service? Not sure . . . but the magistrates heard whatever the charge was called and did the right thing. They allowed us to beat the Christians with sticks and strip them naked. Then into the prison they went - can't tell you for how long they were meant to stay there. We don't care really - there's just some satisfaction for us that their act of "liberating" our slave led them to lose their freedom. Catharsis for us - an eloquent symmetry.

Taking one step outside this imaginative narrative, what do we see? We see someone freed from an oppressive condition. We see the community failing to rejoice, because it can read the liberation only from a perspective of commerce. We see the same narrowed vision leading them to deeds of violence. I do not see the new freedom of the other. I see only my narrower interests. Freedom came into the picture - but I see only myself.

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I wonder what kind of conversation might have gone on in the dark as the results of the earthquake became clearer - which of Paul or Silas, or their fellow prisoners mentioned the obvious fact that the walls had gone and the way to escape was open. There's the door to freedom - all we need to do now is walk that way. When you know, like Paul and Silas must have known, that the imprisonment was deeply wrong anyway, and this hole in the wall seemed obviously a gift from God (although we need to say that God is not in every earthquake), why not just do what is obvious - take the way to freedom. How silly would it be not to embrace this chance to be free!

We don't know how that night time conversation went - none of the detail. We do know, though, that no one took the opportunity to run. By the morning, even though the prison had holes in it, not a single prisoner was missing. What we **also** know is that the jailer's first instinct on finding the

jail wide open was to draw his sword with the intention to kill himself. So obvious to him was what price he'd need to pay if he'd lost a prisoner, that he was just getting on with paying the price - with his life. I'm thinking that what was obvious to him (about the cruelty of the system he worked in) would also have been obvious to Silas and Paul. They would have known what it would have meant for their jailer if they'd escaped - would they? We can't be sure, but we know that they decided to stay. We know also that they're quick and ready to stop the jailer from killing himself when that looks like what he's going to do.

Leaving the prison would be freedom to them - but it would have been death for the jailer. Our freedom needs to be embraced in a way that does not forget the vulnerabilities of the other - well, that's the case in this part of the story. In the first part of the story, freedom is resented because slave owners can see only their own wallets. In this second part of the story, freedom is held gently, while the needs of the other are considered. This is the model for being free that is followed by those who know Jesus and his God.

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Here are two thoughts about freedom, and how it's claimed in the world just now. The first thought is about the way we express freedom through our use of speech. We say that we have freedom of speech. More often than not, when in the news we hear about freedom of speech, it is because someone has used speech to offend someone else - or to make life harder for a minority. I have freedom of speech; it is about my right to speak. I think though, that quite often, as we speak about our rights, sadly infrequently is considered the space into which we speak - seldom considered is who else inhabits that space, what the effect of our speech might be for them as they manage their vulnerabilities. Paul and Silas could walk to freedom - that opportunity seems to have been given to them. They govern that back, because they don't want their freedom to imperil the jailer. They moderate their freedom (which we later hear they were able fully to own the next day) because freedom for them exists within their concern for someone else. Freedom constrained by love of neighbour. One might wonder, actually, whether they would ever have felt free had they had to carry for the rest of their lives the name or face of a jailer they had abandoned to despair.

The second thought is about a coalition that had the freedom to use the rules of urgency to rush through some legislation without any careful scrutiny being applied to their bill through a select committee process. They had the freedom to do so - so that's what they did. They did not make room for the voices of others to bring insight. Some people have said that they abandoned any concern for "the slave girls" of the economy. The freedom of the slave girls from what oppresses them seemed not to be something for consideration - although there will be a legislative process available to those who can start again with a more challenging process - and exercise great patience.

Whether you come at this example from the left or from the right, a group of skilled women, ex-members of parliament from National, Labour, New Zealand First and Green backgrounds, have formed a "people's select committee" - to have the kind of information-seeking conversation that a select committee might have had, if it had been formed. The government was free to act under urgency - they used that freedom. When you have impressive people from a wide variety of political perspectives staging a better process than the process chosen - you must wonder, mustn't you, about the wisdom (sometimes) of using your freedom in way perceived as being "all about me".

The owners of a slave girl in Philippi get violent because she has been freed. Paul and Silas restrain their available freedom, not for optics (it's dark in prison at midnight), but because it's the right use of freedom - freedom operated within a community that cares for the freedom and welfare of the vulnerable other.

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How did we begin? We began with the statement: there are two scenes here, each one featuring an act of liberation, and each featuring a community reaction to the brand new freedom that has been given.

How do we end? We end with a moment of quiet.