

2 June 2019

Acts 16.16-34

Dramatic Release/Rescue

A story of three quite different rescues.

Three stories of people being trapped and set free.

The first story is the story of the slave girl.

Now we have to do a lot of second-guessing to understand this girl's situation, because there is a lot of information that we don't have, and there is much about 1st Century Mediterranean society that is very different to our own.

What are we told about her?

1. She was a slave who made a lot of money for her owners.

Here was someone who was exploited. She was at the bottom of a social system that meant she wasn't her own person. She was owned.

In some ways she was fortunate, because whatever it was that made her different, also made her valuable – she had become a source of income for her owners.

It is interesting that we are told that she had owners rather than just one owner. Had she at some point been auctioned off to a consortium of owners because of her money-making potential?

But that just adds to the sense in which she was little more than a commodity to her owners?

2. We are told that she had a spirit by which she predicted the future.

Remember that this was a society where everyone was religious in some way or another. Everyone believed that the world of flesh and blood was in some way controlled or influenced by the world of the gods. Everyone had different ideas about how you kept on the side of the gods, and kept the gods on your side.

Often, if people were different, they were seen as being different because the spirit of one of the gods inhabited them or guided them.

It is likely that this girl was different from everyone else in some way. Perhaps she had fewer social inhibitions. Possibly she was more intuitive than others. It is likely that she had the audacity to say the things that came into her mind ... that others wouldn't say. And perhaps sometimes they hit the mark.

And so she was used by her owners who claimed that her odd and impulsive way of speaking was because she had been taken over by a spirit of one of the gods.

She was trapped by slavery and exploitation, but she was also trapped by having a personality that others didn't understand and that labelled her as different.

So this girl lived with this double-imprisonment, if you like.

She was trapped in slavery and exploitation.

She was trapped in a personality that marked her as different.

And she was at the mercy of both and could control neither.

And so she finds herself unable to control her obsession about Paul. There is something about Paul that catches her attention, and because of her personality a thought has come into her head and regardless of social etiquette or social consequences she just has to voice that thought.

And she keeps on doing it day after day, whenever Paul makes the journey from Lydia's house where he is staying out to the place of prayer – which has become the meeting place for the small Christian community in Philippi.

“These men are the servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way of salvation.”

You would have thought that Paul would have welcomed this commentary on his work.

Certainly, if you hear it from a Jewish perspective, she has intuitively grasped what Paul is all about.

But if you hear it through the ears of the man of the street in Philippi, filled with ideas of there being a plethora of gods, and with no one fixed idea of what 'salvation' actually means, they could have thought that Paul was bringing a

message about a god who was at the top of the pile of all of the gods, offering some kind of escape from the burdens of the physical world.

Now you can read this as if short-tempered Paul has just had enough of this silly girl, who was rather getting on his nerves.

But it might be altogether different to that. He could be deeply troubled about the plight of the girl. Perhaps after seeing her for a few days he came to realise that she was repeating this message out of an inner trauma, not in a spirit of partnership. He saw the forces at work in the life of this girl, dehumanising her, tearing her apart and cutting her off from everyone else.

And he longed for her to be freed from those forces. And it is to those dehumanising forces that Paul speaks his word of command ... and the girl is set free.

Now it is sad that we don't know the full story about this girl. What happens now?

She might have been released and set free from those forces within her that singled her out and made her different. But she was still a slave. And she no longer had her USP – her unique selling point. She was no longer a valuable commodity to own.

The best result for her would have been for Lydia, the new convert to Christianity, to have taken her under her wing and brought her into her household.

But we simply don't know.

And it goes to show that this whole freedom thing can be extremely complex. Set free from the dehumanising forces within her, she still remained a slave ... and now actually a less valuable slave than she had been before.

I also want to reflect here that often the dehumanising forces that press in upon people who are different – different personalities, different ways of expressing themselves, different ways of experiencing the world – are not only the forces that are at work within them. Those dehumanising forces are also forces at work in the wider society that always struggles to cope with difference. The

forces that need to be challenged are not only the forces at work within a person, but often more fully those forces that are at work in the wider society. We are trapped in multiple ways, and rescue from one situation will often have repercussions on other areas of our lives.

Whether in the end this was truly a blessing for her, would have depended upon whether the other forces that dehumanised this girl's life were also then addressed by others.

This situation then leads to another story of imprisonment and rescue – the story of Paul and Silas.

What are the forces at work that lead to their imprisonment?

It all begins with money ... as so much does in this world.

The people who own this girl and have been making money out of her can do so no longer.

The thing that made her different had been taken away, and they saw their easy source of income disappear. My guess is that there was no thought for the girl in this. She would have been discarded, or put to menial duties. She could even have become a drain on them, because they would now have to feed her.

They clearly had some social standing because they had the social position and the means to bring a legal case against Paul and Silas.

They are motivated in this by personal greed – or at least a sense of affront because Paul and Silas have cut off a valuable source of income.

But they are astute. They realise that if they are to exert any kind of power over Paul and Silas they have to pull on other strings to get public support.

1. They play the race game

“These men are Jews” ... because Jews were different – they dressed differently, ate differently, worshipped differently ... they would often be the objects of suspicion across the Roman empire ... and not least in Philippi where there wasn't even a synagogue.

Paul and Silas were the easy targets of that racism that we see so often in our world – and that today continues to rear its ugly head in the populist politics of the contemporary world.

Somebody is different ... they are not from around here ... and they become the focus of people's fear and suspicions.

2. They play the fear card.

“These people are politically subversive.”

- ‘they are throwing our city into an uproar’ – they are undermining the authority of Rome.

They had very little grounds for claiming this at that time ... it was simply that these Christians were different ...

On the whole, people like a quiet life. They don't want people upsetting the status quo. And in particular they don't want someone from outside coming in and stirring things up.

But they weren't particularly interested in telling the truth, they wanted to stir up trouble. And so they labelled Paul and Silas as political trouble-makers.

These are powerful forces at work in human communities – they were then and they are now. And these forces of racism and fear create the situation in which Paul and Silas find themselves first beaten and then thrown into prison.

And it is from this prison that God rescues them.

And yet it is a strange sort of rescue ... because no one actually escapes!

Earthquakes were not unknown in that part of northern Greece. This particular earthquake had just enough force to open the doors and loosen the fastenings of the chains, but not enough force to bring the whole of the prison down.

No one then knew what caused earthquakes, and so many blamed them on the gods expressing their anger or stirring things up.

Twice before in Acts we read of Peter being rescued by an angel from prison ... and just miraculously getting up in the middle of the night, escorted by an angel, and walking out of the prison (Acts 5 and Acts 12).

But here Paul and Silas are released from their shackles, but they choose to stay put. They are set free, but they use their freedom to stay just where they are.

I wonder if there is not here a lesson of what it is to be both free and living in a place of captivity?

We can be set free by God, and yet choose to stay in that place where we had experienced captivity in order to witness to the freedom that God gives us within that place.

Paul and Silas are set free, but they do not escape. They stay put in order to continue to witness to the true freedom that God gives.

And actually there is a strange dynamic going on throughout this story of their imprisonment between captivity and freedom. Paul and Silas had set out earlier that day to go to the place of prayer, where no doubt they would have sung God's praises, prayed to God and taught the way of Jesus.

Those plans had to be shelved, and they end up in prison ... but still they carry on doing what they had set out to do: praying, singing God's praises and teaching the way of Jesus. Captivity and imprisonment couldn't stop them being and doing who they were called by God to do.

And even when they are set free, they see the opportunity to continue doing and being who they were called to be, and so they stay there.

And then there is the third story of dramatic release. The story of the jailer.

Here we see the story of a man who thought his life had hit rock bottom, but who ends up with a life wholly transformed by Jesus.

And it is no wonder that when the earthquake hit the jail he thought the only option for him was to take his own life.

There was not a great deal of compassion and understanding for menial employees of the Roman state. If you did your job well, you were looked after. But if not ... there was not a great deal of leniency.

If a jailer allowed prisoners in his care to escape, he would often face the punishment that those prisoners would have faced had they been found guilty of their crimes.

And this jailer couldn't face that kind of punishment, and so he takes a sword to take his own life.

Until Paul's voice calls out to tell him that everyone is still there, safe and secure. The story begins with Paul being concerned for the troublesome slave girl, and it now ends with Paul being concerned for the jailer.

And the jailer asks Paul a rather loaded question: "What must I do to be saved?"

Now I say that it is a loaded question, because in the original Greek there are so many different ways in which it can be read. The word that is translated 'saved' can mean all sorts of things:

- healed
- put right
- rescued
- made whole

It can have a very practical, down-to-earth meaning. And it can also be used to talk about our relationship with God.

So these words can be translated, "How can I get out of this mess?" Because it is quite possible that just at that moment, his relationship with God was not the first thing on his mind.

But Paul is never one to miss an opportunity. And whatever this jailer might mean by being rescued, Paul knows that what he really needs to turn his life around is a new relationship with God through Jesus. And Paul does what Paul does best. He tells this man and his family all about Jesus and the rescue that he can bring us, and the freedom that he can give us.

And he and all his household are baptised.